

Adrift in A World

Prologue: Involuntary Flight

Harry Potter glared at Voldemort, chained to a stone wall but still radiating defiance and hatred. Death Eaters stood in a circle around Harry and their master, in a manner eerily reminiscent of his fourth year. Catcalling and mocking, they bellowed their hatred and defiance of the falling side of Light, and were there as witnesses to Voldemort's championship over the Boy-Who-Lived, as they battled for one last time.

He had been a prisoner of the Dark Lord for over a month, ever since that disastrous battle at Hogsmeade...

"Don't think about that!" Harry thought to himself, but it was too late. Images of the Weasley twins, for once silent and unmoving, rose to the forefront of Harry's mind. When those two had died, it seemed like the spirit of the Weasley family had broken, but the last Harry saw, they were still fighting. Along with the images of the twins, came his thoughts of Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Luna. The nagging thought in his mind was that he didn't even know if they were still alive, or tortured to madness, or—

"STOP!"

Another voice entered Harry's head, one that he recognized as Snape's. He searched throughout the Death Eaters until his eyes met those of Severus Snape.

In his sixth year, Snape had finally managed to teach Harry Occlumency. Of course, that was after they had each gained each other's trust in an accidental battle of wills.

Mentally thanking Snape from stopping his near-hysterical thoughts, he tried to control his emotions. Concentration was absolutely crucial as Voldemort, intent on getting the Order's secrets out of Harry, had

no doubt devised another torture to make him betray his friends and the only resisting force of the Light.

Over the time of a month, Harry had continuously bested against the Death Eaters by refusing to buckle under their tortures. After the first week, Harry found himself becoming almost used to the Cruciatus Curse. After being held under it for seconds at a time, it had just stopped affecting him so much and he had spent his time taunting the Death Eaters holding him under it. After that, the Death Eaters had gotten permission to be 'creative', and Harry never knew peace again, though he still refused to betray the Order.

Harry had seen Severus several times throughout his stay as a prisoner, but Snape always seemed to try and avoid him, unwilling to participate in torturing Harry. The one thing Snape did, however, was report to the Order as he had just the day before.

FLASHBACK

Severus rushed through the front door of 12 Grimmauld Place. "Dumbledore!" he gasped, interrupting the middle of an Order meeting, which all of the remaining Weasleys and Granger had been allowed to sit in. "We have a problem!"

Everyone immediately was on alert and facing him, all pale and hopeless after the loss of the last hope against Voldemort. They all seemed to expect the worst, and Severus wasn't about to disappoint them.

"What is it, Severus?" Albus asked, now looking like the hundred or so years he was, without the constant twinkle in his eye. Albus knew that this couldn't last forever. He knew that Riddle would find some way of sidestepping Harry's iron will. Harry would never tell Order secrets as a result of torture, but Tom would find some way around that. He always did, and Occlumency wasn't infallible. . .

"The Dark Lord has given up torturing Harry for the information," Severus said, managing to keep his ever-present emotionless expression. None in the Order looked hopeful about this. They

weren't naïve, and they waited for him to continue. "He has decided to use Veritaserum."

Curses were uttered softly, belittling their intensity. This could completely destroy the Order, and nothing could be done about it.

Kingsley talked over the muttering group. "Severus, can't you add a nullifier to the potion? You're their Potions Master."

Snape didn't even bother to sneer at Shacklebolt. He had lost his sneer a long time ago as the war became bleaker. "There is no ingredient or spell I could add that the Dark Lord wouldn't notice. As to brewing a faulty potion, he already has his own stock."

His emotionless mask slipped and he slammed his fist onto the table in frustration. "There is nothing I can do!"

He slumped into a chair as the Headmaster began to speak. "We must relocate," Albus said, looking around at the bleak faces of the Order, particularly the Weasleys'. They had all lost the mischievous spark once the twins had died at the Hogsmeade battle. Albus hadn't voiced a particular opinion of his, knowing it wouldn't be well accepted, but he thought it was a mercy that at least the two twins had died together, instead of one being left behind.

"Harry doesn't have to be the Secret Keeper for Veritaserum to work, but the Order can move, become more underground." He kept the thought that without Harry there wasn't much of a hope for fighting anymore to himself, though he could see it in the faces of the few that knew the Prophecy.

He sighed, and stood from his place at the head of the table. "We simply have to relocate."

END FLASHBACK

Severus looked at the defiant form of Harry Potter from behind his Death Eater mask. It was just a year ago that he had mocked the boy and said that he was just like his father, but Severus now knew that wasn't true. Perhaps James Potter could last a battle —'If his

stupidity didn't kill him first,' a voice in his head said—but he wouldn't have been able to last a month under the hands of the Death Eaters.

Severus felt a small amount of pride for the student that he used to hate so much. At the beginning of the school year, Dumbledore had once again tried to force the two to cooperate, though with little success at the beginning.

The two of them had raged at each other, constantly bickering and insulting the other, until they had finally had a duel to find out who was the better fighter (each had been sure it was themselves), and to this day they swore under Dumbledore's stern gaze that it was just Defense practice.

Both had ended up in the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey had told them on no uncertain terms that their "ridiculous squabble" would end immediately. They had glared frostily at each from opposite hospital beds until Potter had told him that the Sorting Hat originally wanted to put him in Slytherin. After that they found that they had a lot in common, especially as enemies against the Dark Lord.

The first thing Severus had taught him was Potions, because, just as he had told Harry, "It is disgraceful that anyone could be considered for Slytherin with such a poor talent at Potions," but at one occasion the boy had just glared at him and deliberately threw a wrong ingredient into his potion, which had made the whole potions lab turn the colors of the Gryffindor house.

That action made Severus retaliate by turning the offending Gryffindor green and silver, making Harry yell in outrage. They fell into a somewhat easy camaraderie after that, though it nearly dissolved once Harry told him of the crimes against his Potions ingredients.

FLASHBACK

"You WHAT!" Snape shouted, looking at the grinning face of Harry Potter, who was absentmindedly making a potion. Severus had drilled it into his head long enough so that he didn't even have to

concentrate anymore. "You made Polyjuice Potion in your second year?"

"Yep," Harry answered, now smirking at the outraged look on Snape's face, realizing that the Potions Professor was near the boiling point. "Well, it wasn't actually me who made it. I just had some to disguise myself as one of Malfoy's lackeys to find out if he was opening the Chamber of Secrets."

That comment stopped Severus in his tracks. "You honestly thought that Draco Malfoy could be able to open the Chamber of Secrets?"

"I was twelve, and I wasn't that far off. It was Malfoy's dad who started the whole thing," he paused. "Not that I needed an excuse to throw a firework in the middle of class or anything..."

Severus looked up at this, eyes full of rage. "That was you!" Harry looked up at that, alert at Snape's sudden change of tone. Snape dragged him away from the potion he was currently brewing, and into the hallway leading out of the dungeons. "We're going up to the Headmaster's office. There is no way you'll get out of this one, Potter."

Harry wrenched his arm out of Snape's grip, his eyes full of challenge. "You do realize that you left an unstable potion alone don't you, Professor?" As Snape's eyes widened fractionally when he realized what Harry meant, there was a small explosion from inside the potions lab. Snape had rushed back inside, groaning when he saw bunches of dandelions on every surface, singing 'Weasley is Our King'.

"How is it, Potter," Snape had asked seething, giving up on ever getting Harry in trouble with the Headmaster, "that your failed potions always end up doing something dramatically horrible to my lab?"

Harry smirked cheekily at this, and started the potion back up again. "You'll find out that I'm not nearly as miserable at potions as I used to be. The twins were very helpful with that."

Snape glared at Harry. That smirk had brought back memories of James Potter, and Snape's eyes turned into emotionless pools of black ink. "Foolish Gryffindor, with your stupid plots. With the backwards way you go about things, it's no wonder you get people killed . . ."

Harry froze at that comment, but continued working on the potion. When it was finished, Harry corked the potion and slammed it on Snape's desk.

"There's your potion, sir," he had snarled, more icily than even Snape himself could hope to do, then marched out the door.

It was then that Snape had discovered Harry's talent for wandless and wordless magic, because the boy's anger had stayed on that vial all night, and Snape couldn't touch it without getting burned.

END FLASHBACK

Severus mentally shook himself. He was getting as reminiscent as a foolish Gryffindor. He saw Harry looking at a clear potion in the hands of Lucius Malfoy, and faced the scene in front of him. It was coming...

Voldemort stood in front of Harry, smirking sadistically as he knew that triumph was close.

"Don't worry, Harry Potter," the Dark Lord said in a high, cold voice like an icy wind. "As soon as you betray your foolish Order, I, as a merciful Lord, will let you join your pathetic Mudblood mother."

The surrounding Death Eaters laughed at that, and edged closer, intent on seeing whatever was going to happen.

Harry saw red at that. He knew that he would be forced to take Veritaserum. This foolproof way to make him spill the Order's headquarters was the only thing that would make Voldemort this happy. But he thought that if this was going to happen, he needed to cause as much damage as possible first.

“I will never know what you have against Muggleborns and half-bloods,” Harry said, looking at Voldemort head on. “After all, you are one yourself.”

Silence...

The jeering Death Eaters fell silent at that, and stared at their Master in confusion, while Voldemort looked at him with no emotion.

“What makes you claim such a thing as that?” The wizard asked softly, and the Death Eaters quieted to hear what their Master had to say. “How could I be half-blood when I am so powerful? That lie is a foolish claim, Potter, and one that you shall pay for.”

The Death Eaters looked mollified at that short speech, though Harry wasn’t prepared to give up, so he spoke sarcastically and patronizingly. “Of course, Voldemort, that’s why your dad was a Mug—”

He was immediately silenced as Voldemort conjured a wickedly jagged sword and slashed his right arm. Harry gasped and fell silent, willing himself not to cry out. ‘So much for that idea,’ he thought to himself, and could hear a concurring echo of Snape’s voice say, ‘Idiotically Gryffindor.’

“Desist in your attempts at insults,” Voldemort said in a ringing voice before speaking in a quiet voice, so only Harry could hear. “Your information is not so valuable that I won’t kill you slowly and mercilessly.”

Harry rolled his eyes at the Dark Lord, putting on a show of bravado that would have made Snape cringe if he could. “Whatever you say, Tom.”

Turning his back on the Boy-Who-Lived, Voldemort commanded, “Bring the potion forth, Lucius.”

Malfoy Sr. smirked at Harry, carrying a bottle of crystal clear liquid that he gave, bowing, to his Master.

"I trust you know what this is, Potter?" Voldemort asked in his cold, icy voice. Harry didn't respond, just mutely glaring at the man he had hated for so long.

"Apparently you do. Don't worry, Harry Potter. We'll get you to talk soon enough." All the Death Eaters guffawed at this, while their leader smirked cruelly. "Yes, you will talk. There is no defense for Veritaserum and no defense for your pathetic Order. Now, Potter, anything you want to say before you betray the Light?"

"Sure," Harry responded recklessly, wondering if he could annoy Voldemort to the point where he would just be killed instead of interrogated. Severus wondered the same thing though with slightly less hope.

"It took you long enough to think of Veritaserum, Tom," Harry said, relishing the look of hatred on Voldemort's face. "Here I thought you were smart, but then again, if you can be stopped for thirteen years by a one year old . . ."

'You've got to hand it to him,' Severus thought as Voldemort stalked up to Harry. 'He definitely knows how to anger the Dark Lord.' However, that anger only resulted in Voldemort wrenching Harry's jaw open with a loud snap, and forcing three drops of Veritaserum into his mouth.

Harry's eyes glazed over, becoming foggy as per the side-effects of Veritaserum, but Severus thought, with more than a little hope, that his eyes weren't as foggy as they should have been with such a high dosage. 'The stubborn Gryffindor is resistant to the Imperius, maybe . . .' But Severus knew it was a foolish hope, and thought with certainty that the Order was about to be discovered.

"Harry Potter," the Dark Lord asked, smirking at his sure triumph, "where does the Order of Phoenix meet?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer, his face slack, and Severus shut his eyes. This was the beginning of the end.

“Twelve—” Harry said, his voice emotionless, and then he paused. Severus opened his eyes, and thought that he seemed to be struggling against the potion. Then Harry’s eyes cleared as if they had never been foggy.

“Go to Hell!” Harry snarled at Voldemort, appearing to have done the impossible and beaten the potion.

The Dark lord hissed in annoyance, and shot ‘Petrificus Totalus’ at him. Frozen solid, Harry couldn’t even struggle as Voldemort pulled his head back, and poured the entire bottle of Truth Potion down his throat.

“Where does the Order of the Phoenix meet?” Voldemort demanded in a clipped, ice cold tone.

“Twelve—” Harry started again, but shuddered and gagged from the amount of Veritaserum forced into his system, unable to stop his jaw from violently spasming as he refused to answer. Voldemort’s spell was having no effect on his involuntary movements.

Harry turned to face Voldemort, but gasped in surprise as felt himself being jerked as if by Portkey and vanishing.

The Death Eaters looked in shock at the chains that just hold Harry Potter, their greatest enemy, and chaos erupted. Severus managed to escape much of the Dark Lord’s wrath by saying that Dumbledore would be suspicious of his absence if he wasn’t back soon.

He Disapparated and ran through the kitchen of Grimmauld Place where members were scurrying to erase all signs of information.

“Dumbledore!” he yelled, immediately getting the wizard’s attention. “We have a problem!”

Chapter 1: Introduction and Interrogation

Harry groaned as his head knocked against a stone barrier, stealing the breath out of his lungs and making his body numb as he tried to breathe in as much fresh air as possible. He opened his eyes and looked above him at a starry sky, with constellations that pecked hauntingly at his memory. His eyes automatically sought out the Dog Star, before his nerves started operating again in one long wave of pain. His arm throbbed as it continued bleeding in the mild air and his jaw jumped and twitched, still under the effects of Veritaserum.

Before the Truth Potion overcame his system, Harry hurriedly covered his mouth with his hand and mouthed the words, "12 Grimmauld Place." Immediately the potion's grip on his mind and jaw disappeared, and the burning sensation in his veins that he hadn't even acknowledged stopped. He sighed with relief before trying to figure out where he was at.

His sight was blurry, as it had been since he lost his glasses at the Hogsmeade battle a month before. But that didn't stop him from recognizing his surroundings. He seemed to be in a stone courtyard, and to his right were tantalizingly familiar woods that seemed oddly like the Forbidden Forest. He turned to look at what was to his right and gasped soundlessly.

Rising like a sheer cliff was the outer wall of Hogwarts, a few windows glowing with what he knew to be torchlight, though he saw no silhouettes through the shades.

Harry tried to comprehend what had happened to him. It seemed impossible to transport right to Hogwarts. He didn't know how to Apparate, even if there hadn't been Anti-Apparition wards around Voldemort's stronghold.

He closed his eyes and moaned as the ground underneath him swayed and the pounding in his head made everything take on a reddish hue. Ignoring that as much as he could, he tried to sit up, but shock and the draining influence of the Veritaserum became too much for him. Harry succumbed to the darkness growing in the edges of his mind, not noticing two figures running rapidly towards him.

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office in the highest tower of the Hogwarts castle. He was one of the few in the castle still awake, even though there were several teachers and Order members scattered throughout the castle. Ignoring the chiming of a faraway clock, the Headmaster concentrated on report after report of Voldemort's activities. Deaths were common in shadowy areas across the country, there was at least one Dark Mark looming in the sky every night, but most of the British wizards refused to get involved, leaving the fighting to the small minority of wizards on either side. Though, admittedly, Voldemort had more followers, who were not afraid of breaking the most ancient of Wizarding laws.

What made the fight against Voldemort so difficult was his strong grasp on the Wizarding Government. Throughout the years the Dark wizard had snuck in his supporters one after another, until getting favorable (for the Light side) laws was almost impossible, and the government was next to useless.

Albus shook himself out of his melancholy thoughts when Fawkes trilled at him, a sound that bolstered his falling faith in the coming triumph of the Light Side.

As he set the numerous files back onto his desk, Remus Lupin burst into his office, startling Fawkes who immediately swiveled to look at the newcomer.

"Albus," the werewolf gasped, out of breath after apparently running to Dumbledore's office from across the school. "There's an intruder on the grounds. Severus got him, and is bringing him to the Hospital Wing. Neither of us can recognize him, but—"

"But?" Albus asked sharply, already heading down the spiral staircase from his office.

"He looks bad Albus, like death warmed over. Neither Severus nor I know what side he is on."

'Indeed,' Albus thought to himself as Remus led the way through multiple shortcuts to the Hospital Wing. "Is Poppy awake?"

"She no doubt is now," Remus responded, nearly running through the corridors with Dumbledore right behind him. "If she is, then you won't get to see him until she has completely healed him, and even then I doubt she'd let anyone go in and question him."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at Remus' obvious reference to the Hogwarts Matron's protection of her patients, which both of them had been witnesses to several times.

"How did he get here?" Albus questioned.

"Severus and I were patrolling the grounds when he suddenly appeared. No flash of light, no noise, he just appeared then toppled over onto the ground. The only movement he made was to cover his mouth with his hand and he looked around before falling unconscious."

The two had reached the Hospital Wing by then, but before Remus could open the door, the overprotective Poppy Pomfrey stepped out, giving the two adults the evil eye as they attempted to get into the Hospital Wing.

"Don't even think about," she snapped as Albus opened his mouth to say something. "I don't care if you know nothing about him. I don't care if he's dangerous. I don't care if he is You-Know-Who himself. I took an oath to heal anyone in need, and I have no intention of breaking it now. You will not bother him until I say so. Is that understood?"

Albus and Remus sighed and nodded, knowing it was useless to argue.

"Only Severus can come into the Hospital Wing at this moment and that is because he is a Potions Master. If I see either of you try to sneak in, I will give you a reason to be allowed in the Hospital Wing."

She gave them one last strict glare, as if daring them to cross her, and then marched back into the Hospital Wing, snapping the door shut behind her.

The two left in the corridor looked at each, sighed in defeat, and then took up posts on either side of the door, waiting until they could discover more about their curious visitor.

Harry silently woke, a skill he had picked up after living in captivity, and looked about him without moving. He suddenly stopped as he realized that he was no longer in the dungeons of Voldemort's stronghold, but was in a clean, white room, lying on a comfortable bed.

His mind went into overdrive, wondering what could have happened. The last thing he remembered was being forced to take Veritaserum, and throwing it off. Then he mentally gasped as his mind played the image of the stone courtyard, him lying next to the wall of Hogwarts. Was he going insane? There was no way to suddenly appear at Hogwarts, as Hermione had drilled into his and Ron's head many, many times.

Not knowing if he was still a prisoner of Voldemort, had somehow been transported to Hogwarts, had finally snapped, or a bizarre combination of all three choices, he decided to make his consciousness known for better or worse.

He groaned softly and then tried to sit up, tried being the operative word. His arm stung and gave out, resulting with him falling back onto the bed, dignity now lost and leaving him gasping in pain. He was about to try again, though slower this time, when a witch bustled over to him and stepped into his path of vision.

"Awake, are you?" said a voice that he couldn't quite place, though it sounded intensely familiar. Harry gave up trying to figure out who it was though. His vision was blurry and his head ached, stopping him from thinking clearly.

"Well, now take this potion," the voice continued, and Harry slowly sat up, leaning against the wall behind him. He refused to take the potion, and glared menacingly at the blurry witch.

“Come now,” the witch said crossly, but to little effect as Harry, still untrusting, without knowing exactly what was going on, kept his mouth shut and started subtly locating where the door and window was, just in case.

The Mediwitch sighed but persisted none the less. “If you don’t drink this potion, I will have to restrain you and make you drink it myself.” Hearing the possible threat, Harry swiveled his head back to look at her.

Seeing that she had her wand out, Harry mentally apologized to her and, acting on sudden energy and adrenaline that he didn’t know he still had. He snatched her wand from her grasp and vaulted over the opposite edge of the bed, ignoring the extreme protests of his leg and arm. The Mediwitch shrieked, and Harry pointed the wand back at its owner while trying to stop the room from spinning and was trying to figure out what was going on as the door burst open.

Albus and Remus, thankful it was still summer and students weren’t walking through the corridors, still stood at their self-assigned posts by the Hospital door. They were soon joined by Severus, who was kicked out by Madam Pomfrey, after delivering the potions she needed.

At the two adults’ curious looks, Severus gave a report about the stranger’s condition, resisting the urge to smirk at their almost childlike curiosity. “From what I can tell, as Poppy won’t let me within two meters of him, is that he has a broken leg, a slash down his arm, and multiple Cruciatus. Those are at least his major physical injuries. Beyond that...” he trailed off.

“Where do you think he got so injured at?” Remus asked, with a touch of concern and suspicion in his voice.

Severus sneered. “I am not a Seer, Lupin. If I didn’t know better I’d say he was a prisoner of the Dark Lord, but I’ve never seen him before.”

Albus was about to say something when they heard a shriek from within the Hospital Wing. All three wizards pulled out their wands and

ran inside. They stopped immediately when they saw the stranger holding Madam Pomfrey at wand point while looking as if he was trying desperately to not fall over. He was shaking madly from exhaustion and Cruciatus, but spun to face them when he heard the door bang open.

Madam Pomfrey had a look on her face that was a mixture and outrage and incredulity. After making sure that she was alright, Albus turned to face the stranger, who on second glance was short, though not abnormally so, and rail-thin, with a blurry gaze that was somewhat unfocused.

“Stop ” Albus commanded at the stranger, radiating waves of cold energy.

“Professor Dumbledore?” the stranger exclaimed, slightly lowering the wand. “What’s going on? What happened? Did they find Headquarters?”

Remus saw Albus tense slightly at being addressed so familiarly. He had obviously not expected that.

Meanwhile, Severus, seeing Harry slightly lower Madam Pomfrey’s wand, yelled ‘Incarcerous’ and tied him up. Harry wavered unsteadily on his feet for a second before falling and landing on his wounded right arm, clenching his jaw in pain but eerily not making a sound. Not pausing, Severus Summoned Poppy’s wand and gave it back to her while the now-prisoner sent him death glares slightly reminiscent of his own.

“Snape,” he exclaimed in a hoarse voice, glaring at the object of his anger still. “What was that for? It bloody well wasn’t appreciated. You should have known I wasn’t going attack you or anything when I realized who you were.” He continued muttering to himself while trying to twist out of Severus’s conjured ropes, quickly weakening himself and inflaming the wound on his arm.

“Severus ” Madam Pomfrey snapped at the Potions Master, who was staring at the stranger with a look of almost confusion on his face, though when he turned to look at her, his face was once more

emotionless. "You will release my patient now, or I will make sure that you are trapped in my Hospital for weeks." she threatened.

Cringing slightly, Severus muttered "Finite Incantatem."

As soon as he was released Harry jumped up into a standing position and addressed Albus once more. "What is going on?"

Albus looked at him with his piercing blue eyes. "I'm not quite sure. Perhaps if you told me who you are..."

Harry gaped at him. 'What the—' "You don't know who I am?" He asked weakly. He was going insane, he knew it now...

Dumbledore shook his head at Harry, his eyes swiftly searching Harry's face for an answer to exactly how he got here and who he was.

"I don't believe we've ever met before, Mr. . . ."

Before Harry could answer, he felt someone grab him from behind and start pulling him back towards the Hospital bed he had recently vaulted over. He looked over his shoulder to see the unknown Mediwitch being the cause of this.

"Have you not realized," Harry said in an icy tone, still confused over exactly what was going on, "that you have yet again left your wand within grasp?"

She pushed him easily onto the bed, making Harry have bitter inner thoughts about how he was still short and scrawny, and pointed her wand straight at him. His eyes widened fractionally and he unconsciously growled deep in his throat, unnerving the Mediwitch who saw a wary glint in his eyes.

She put her wand back into her holster and picked up a vial of potion.

"Drink," she said firmly, thrusting it in his direction. Looking at it, Harry remembered it from somewhere but was unable to think clearly enough to identify it. Hoping it wasn't an odd poison that he

remembered, he took the vial and drank it, grimacing as it scratched at his throat.

“What was it?” He asked, his eyes feeling heavy and droopy.

“A Sleeping Potion,” she answered, watching the potion take effect as the hard green eyes slowly closed.

“A Sleeping Potion,” Harry murmured. “Interesting choice.”

Suddenly his eyes flew open, and he gripped her wrist as she started to walk away. “No Veritaserum,” he whispered, his last conscious thought about the likelihood of them dosing him with it.

‘My odds of beating it again would not be good,’ Harry thought drowsily before falling into the first peaceful sleep he had had in quite a while.

Madam Pomfrey watched as the stranger curled into a compact shape instead of stretching out, and something grabbed her attention.

“Albus, come here,” she said. “Look at his wrists.”

She pointed out a ring of bruises circling each of the stranger’s wrists, while noticing how thin his wrists were.

“I think the odds are good he was being held prisoner before he came here,” Madam Pomfrey said quietly. She had picked up the boy’s right hand to see the bruising, but when she dropped it he unconsciously moved it to protect his left forearm. Madam Pomfrey noticed that move with great alarm, but she didn’t point it out to her companions. If the boy before her was a Death Eater, they would kick him out of the castle, which would most likely killing him if he didn’t get medical help.

“What did he say before he fell asleep, Poppy?” Dumbledore asked right behind her, almost making her jump guiltily.

“‘No Veritaserum’,” she said in response, gathering various medical gear to continue treating her patient.

“No Veritaserum,” Dumbledore pondered softly, looking at the stranger closely for the first time.

“He looks horrible,” Remus said from beside him, also looking at the boy, and Albus couldn’t help but agree. The boy’s shaggy black hair was matted and caked with blood. His face was heavily scarred, as was his arms and hands, but Albus was paying particular attention to a deep scar on the boy’s forehead. He reached forward to brush aside the boy’s scraggly bangs so he could see the entire scar.

“Merlin,” Dumbledore muttered when he saw the scar. Its lightning bolt shape could only mean he had been struck by a powerfully Dark curse. What horrified the Headmaster most was the fact that while it looked old, it still seemed to be slightly bleeding.

“What the Hell is that?” Remus asked, attracting Severus’s attention to the curse scar as well.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think we’ll be able to honor his request of no Veritaserum.”

“But Headmaster,” Poppy said in a scandalized tone as she came back from her office. “My patient asked something not unreasonable, and that request will not be broken while he is in the Hospital Wing.” The Mediwitch glared as if to punctuate her statement. Her glare could cover every student and most of the staff, but it failed to deter Dumbledore.

“Then, Poppy, do we have your permission to take him out of the Hospital Wing?” He saw that the nurse was about to object. “I’m afraid it’s Order business now.”

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips angrily, and then sighed in defeat. “You and your blasted Order,” she said. “Fine. But so help me, if he comes back in worse condition . . .”

She left the threat hanging, and all three of the men hastily nodded.

Poppy turned and muttered a temporary healing spell for the boy's slashed arm. While not healed in the slightest, it was now a scabbed slash instead of a gaping wound. Frowning, she moved closer to the boy, beckoning to Albus.

"I could have sworn I used a heavy Sleeping Potion, but you might as well learn something about him."

Albus was slightly confused at her comment until he noticed the stranger muttering softly. When Albus leaned slightly forward, he was disappointed to notice that the boy's voice was too low and all he could catch was an occasional curse.

"One of my strongest Sleep potions," Poppy said, sounding bemused, "and he's already trying to wake up. I suggest you move him to wherever you're going to before he wakes up and does who knows what."

Albus nodded, and levitated the sleeping figure out of the room, with Remus and Severus following behind. Poppy was left alone, wondering how she would explain her actions if she was ever in a confessional.

The three walked (and one floated) to the Headmaster's office, Albus saying, "Chocolate Frogs," and stepping onto the revolving staircase.

As soon as they reached Albus's inner office, the boy's eyes opened and his awakened magic nullified Albus's Levitation Spell. He immediately dropped to the floor with a quiet and undignified "oomph." He stood from his ungainly spot, striving to balance using his broken leg as little as possible, addressed Dumbledore.

"Was it really necessary to levitate me?" Harry asked crossly. He suddenly remembered his current situation and narrowed his eyes at the ('damn it all,' Harry thought sulkily) slightly towering three that seemed so familiar but said they didn't know who he was.

"Who are you?" Harry asked, letting no emotion color his voice. If he was insane, no need to shout it out to the world. Or maybe the world itself had gone insane . . .

Severus bristled at the stranger's question.

"Since you already seem to be aware of who we are, why don't you tell us who you are?" Snape said, matching emotionless tone for emotionless tone.

'He definitely has Snape's personality,' Harry thought in mild amusement. Out loud he said, "Because I don't trust you." Harry stood staring at them. "I know you're not Death Eaters. They're not this intelligent, or civil. Well," Harry said slightly sarcastically, focusing his gaze on Snape, "in comparison."

Noticing something, or someone, was missing from his usual perch, Harry looked sharply at Dumbledore. "Where's Fawkes?"

The three adults looked slightly unnerved at Harry's mention of Dumbledore's phoenix, and leveled their wands at him.

"How do you know about Fawkes?" Dumbledore asked in his usual light and pleasant tone, not revealing his curiosity and suspicion of the person in front of him.

"I've known Fawkes for years, ever since my second year at Hogwarts." He paused slightly at everyone's confused look. According to them, he apparently had never gone to Hogwarts. A trip down memory lane showed a picture of Hermione discussing her essay about alternate universes. Was it truly possible? It definitely explained how no one knew him, and Dumbledore's office looked slightly different. Harry noticed with a slight feeling of guilt that the instruments he had broken in his fifth year were still standing. However, he didn't think about his alternate dimension theory until he had more facts.

"If you don't remember me being at school here—it was definitely hectic enough to be remembered— and things are slightly off here . . . oh, I don't know. Maybe I fell into the Twilight Zone."

Remus started chuckling at that reference, and Albus and Severus turned to look at him incredulously.

"The Twilight Zone is a Muggle television show," Remus explained. "That certainly proves he isn't a Death Eater."

"You thought I was a Death Eater," the boy dead-panned. Then he snorted in amusement, causing the three adults to raise their eyebrows at him. "Hell'll freeze over and Umbridge'll have a growth spurt before I'm a Death Eater."

The stranger still seemed caustically amused as Severus took advantage of the silence.

"Now," Severus said, "that we've all proven that we are not Death Eaters, perhaps you can explain to us who you are and how you got to Hogwarts."

"Alright," Harry said dubiously. "I'll tell you what you need to know, but I reserve the right to plead the American 5th Amendment." Only Albus seemed to have an idea what he was talking about, and Harry sighed. "I reserve the right to not answer. And I also have some questions, though my queries will be more general. Sort of a question for question sort of thing."

Severus didn't like the confident tone of this newcomer, but Dumbledore seemed to agree to the conditions and offered the boy a seat. Harry did so, having the feeling that he was being ganged up on as the three older wizards faced him and also sat.

"Will you submit to Veritaserum, Mr. . .?" Dumbledore asked, curious as to what the response would be.

"No, and please make my name your last question."

The boy had responded emotionlessly but swiftly, and Albus could detect a feeling of fear and slight panic coming from him.

"Is there any particular reason as to why you refuse to take a Truth Potion?" Albus asked, and was surprised to see the boy grin slightly.

“Past experiences,” Harry said ambiguously. His grin grew wider. “So does that count as two question, or will claiming so persuade Snape to hex me?”

He eyed Snape warily, and seeing the glint of annoyance in the Potion Professor’s eye, decided against further sarcasm. “Okay, never mind. Well, I know that two if not all of you are skilled in legilimency, and I’m not so good at Occlumency that you can’t tell if I’m lying.”

That was a complete and utter lie in itself, of course. He could lie about almost anything untraceably as long as he didn’t feel too strongly about it.

Snape seemed slightly appeased that they wouldn’t be taking a stranger’s complete word. The plan was a good one, but the boy had to have been in Gryffindor to so readily admit his deficiencies.

Albus locked eyes with the boy, slightly bemused by this acerbic character, and twinkling blue eyes met hard, fathomless green. They both looked away at the same time.

“Do you in anyway support Voldemort?” Dumbledore asked first, making sure that the boy’s remark about being a Death Eater was true.

“No, and I never will.” There seemed to be a slight anger and ugliness in the boy’s voice, and Albus knew better than to fall in the trap of asking what it was, at least at the moment.

“How powerful is Voldemort here?” Harry asked. His theory about being in an alternate universe seemed to be making more and more sense.

Remus and Snape both looked at him strangely when he added ‘here’, but Albus’s eyes seemed to flicker with sudden understanding.

“The Light is slowly weakening. Voldemort has taken over the Ireland government, and is close to succeeding here as well.”

Harry was slightly confused by that answer. Were they in a war here or a subtle government takeover? But Harry saved his question for the moment.

“What did you mean by ‘here’?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling, and Harry had a pretty good idea that Dumbledore knew what he meant.

“Well, as far as I can tell, I know all of you, yet none of you know me. That means I’m insane, the rest of you are insane, or I’m in an alternate universe.”

Lupin and Snape both turned to look at Harry as if his first theory seemed the most likely, but he just looked at Dumbledore who nodded in agreement.

“That certainly seems to explain a lot,” the Headmaster said, his eyes twinkling strongly at the utterly stumped looks on his companions’ faces.

“So,” Harry said, shifting slightly and hiding a wince as his leg shifted as well. “Are you in a full-scale war with Voldemort, or a government takeover scenario?”

Snape scowled slightly at the slightly flippant tone of the boy when he said “government takeover,” as if it were no big deal.

“A combination of both would be a sufficient way to put it,” Albus said, also seeming to catch the boy’s undertone and frowning.

“Are you a Light Wizard?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry hesitated slightly. “For the most part.” He tried to ask another question but saw Snape and Lupin point their wands at him. Harry almost looked at Remus incredulously before remembering that the werewolf didn’t know who he was.

“What do you mean ‘for the most part’?” Severus demanded. He didn’t remember the stranger in front of him at any Death Eater

meetings, but that didn't mean anything, whatever the stranger's declarations to the opposite.

Harry glared at Snape in a mockingly familiar sort of way, and Severus felt slightly unnerved before the boy answered. He felt like he should recognize that look . . .

"Fine," Harry said, "but it isn't very friendly to constantly point out that you have a wand and I do not. I've used Dark Spells to eliminate chains, trace Death Eaters, only Dark Magic can lock onto the Dark Mark by the way, and various things like that."

Snape felt like the boy was trying to keep something to himself, and apparently Albus did as well.

"You left something out," Albus said in a commanding voice, and Harry sighed. 'Snape would laugh at this situation. Always telling me to control my emotions . . .'

"Damn manipulative old man," Harry muttered under his breath, but Remus with his werewolf senses caught what he said, and grinned underneath his suspicion.

Closing his eyes, Harry told what he hadn't told anyone in his world, including Snape or Dumbledore. "I tried to use the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange."

At once, the wands around him seemed to stiffen, as if preparing to Stun him on their own.

"Tried? Why?" Dumbledore asked. All of his instinct demanded that he Stun the boy, but something made him pause to find out the rest of this boy's story.

"She killed someone very close to me, my godfather," Harry said, his mouth twisting at remembered guilt. "And before you ask, no, I don't regret using the Curse on her at all. I only regret the fact that it didn't work."

Snape barked a laugh behind him, and Harry glared at him, Remus unconsciously leaning away from the man receiving the glare.

“Of course you couldn’t cast it. You’re only 21, maybe 22.”

Harry was about to open his mouth and argue, but he shut it when he realized what Snape said. ‘21? 22?’ Harry thought with high amusement. ‘This will certainly work for my advantage.’

Harry turned away from Snape, but Remus saw that he did so with a decidedly smug look.

“How would one get into an alternate universe?” Harry asked, effectively closing that line of questioning. However, all of the adults held in their mind how casually the boy in front of them spoke about the Unforgivable.

Dumbledore seemed to instantly go into professor mode. “Inter-dimensional travel is only possible if one quite deliberately breaks the rules of magic without the intention of traveling through space. Does that seem to fit what happened before you appeared here?”

“Yes,” Harry said, ignoring the hyperventilating voice in the back of his head that fully realized his situation. “Has Voldemort ever been temporarily defeated here?”

Harry knew he needed to know the situation with Voldemort, but he was beginning to lose his focus. The pain in his arm and leg was strangely somewhat lulling him to sleep, and he wasn’t sure if he had already asked a similar question to that.

“No,” all three of them responded together, sharing a weary look that Harry sympathized with.

“Damn.”

“What were you doing before you appeared here?” Albus asked curious as to how the boy had broken the rules of magic.

“Resisting Veritaserum.” Snape snorted in disbelief, and Harry rolled his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that Professor. You know I’m telling the truth.”

“Why were you resisting Veritaserum?” Remus asked curiously.

“I’m not going to answer that, sorry,” Harry said with a tone of absolute finality. “Does the Order of the Phoenix exist here?”

Tension in the room almost became tangible at his question.

“What makes you think there is such a thing?” Snape asked emotionlessly, with still with a look of suspicion in his eyes.

Harry smirked to himself, raising one eyebrow at Snape. “One: your reaction, which you really should work on, by the way. Two: my friends and I have been trying to join since my fifth year. But since that pretty much answers my question, the ball is in your court, Professor,” Harry finished, addressing Dumbledore in the final part of his answer.

“If you’re from an alternate universe, what are you going to do here? It’s almost impossible to get back to your universe.”

At Dumbledore’s words, the part of his mind hyperventilating also started developing a spasm, and Harry tried not to panic at the thought that Dumbledore meant it was unlikely he would ever go home.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Harry said. “Probably find more ways of ticking off the Voldemort here as well.”

That response brought another question to the forefront of Albus’ mind. Despite what Poppy might have thought he did indeed see the boy in front of him grab his left forearm.

“If you’re an enemy of Voldemort, why do you have a Dark Mark?”

The boy bristled in anger and his eyes flashed. “I do NOT have the Dark Mark. What could have made you think I have it, you idiotic — oh.”

He turned pale and shivered, unconsciously rubbing his left arm in a way that Severus found very familiar. Then he shook himself and looked at Dumbledore. “I don’t have the Dark Mark, but I have something similar. Before I got here, Voldemort had captured me, and, well . . .” He pushed his left sleeve up in conclusion. Cut into his arm in almost snake-like writing was ‘Mudblood.’

“He wasn’t happy that I had escaped him so many times before,” the boy said in response to the three’s repulsed look at the marred flesh, and he quickly pulled his sleeve down. Anger was barely hidden in his cold green eyes. “So he gave me this wonderful tattoo that won’t heal.”

Albus and Remus both looked faintly horrified at the wound, but Severus looked calculating. Suddenly the Potions Master grabbed the boy’s arm and dragged it into the light to better see it, ignoring the owner’s protests.

“This cut is cursed,” Snape said, looking at the cut with morbid interest.

“I know that, thank you very much,” the boy snapped, snatching his arm back out of Snape’s grip, but then grinned slightly.

All three adults caught the grin, and looked at him as if he were insane.

Harry saw the looks he got, and explained. “Voldemort used some kind of dagger to cut this into my arm, but right after he finished I snatched it and wrote ‘Mudblood’ back onto his arm. Stupid, really, leaving out a magic dagger where I could reach it.”

There was a shocked silence after this announcement until Snape started chuckling. Albus and Remus looked at Severus like he had grown a second head, while Harry looked chagrined.

“Fine, laugh it up Snape. Let me tell you though, it was not one of my smarter decisions. But then again, Voldemort still hasn’t found a way to heal it, so it seems worth it.”

Snape snorted in amusement, and muttered “Gryffindor” under his breath.

“Oy, I resent segregation,” Harry said, trying to keep the exhaustion out of his voice. Shaking his head at Snape’s sense of humor, he had enough energy to ask one more question.

“Is Voldemort immortal here?”

At once the atmosphere darkened, and Dumbledore leaned forward, his attention caught.

“What do you mean by immortal?”

Harry smirked grimly at this, though it wasn’t remotely funny. “Immortal: living forever, the quality of not being able to die, usually rendering one inhuman and feared.”

“No. Is he in yours?”

“Pretty damn close,” Harry said, swallowing a yawn. Apparently that Sleeping Potion was still half effective. “He certainly fits into the ‘no longer human’ category. Wait - what does he look like here?” He looked pointedly at Snape for this question, who narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“Why are you addressing this question to me instead of to the Headmaster?” Snape asked, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“You’re a snippity git, just like you are back in my world, so I’m assuming you’re a Death Eater turned spy, just like back in my world.”

All three spluttered at this, trying to create an argument, and Harry smirked smugly. His smirk was not well-received by Snape.

“What are you so cocky about?” Snape asked in his slick voice that usually met a first year was going to be splattered on the wall. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think that you were in cahoots with Black, trying to pull a prank.”

Harry snarled wordlessly, glaring at the Professor in front of him. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing that you know better then, isn’t it?” It hadn’t yet occurred to him that Sirius, or his parents, could be alive here.

The adults looked slightly taken aback by his reaction until they heard a thumping sound coming from outside the office, making all four share apprehensive glances. The door slammed open, and an irate Mediwitch glared at the four of them.

“Now, Poppy,” Albus began placating, realizing how long they had kept Poppy separated from her patient, but he was silenced when Madam Pomfrey focused her anger on him.

“Wait, Madam Pomfrey?” Harry asked, completely confused. He recognized that voice now, but the Hogwarts nurse looked different than he remembered. Then again, that might have something to do with the fact that his vision kept blurring and Madam Pomfrey had never had to deal with him in this world, probably resulting in less gray hair.

‘Oops,’ Harry thought with a little guilt. ‘I had stolen Madam Pomfrey’s wand.’

Madam Pomfrey ignored him and started yelling at the Headmaster.

“Albus, this boy needs medical care, and you’ve been up here interrogating him for an hour. I am the school matron, and yet the only thing you’ve allowed me to do is make sure he doesn’t bleed to death!”

Harry sighed in irritation, finally getting Madam Pomfrey’s attention.

"I'm fine," he said shortly, and wasn't prepared for her unbelieving snort. "I'm perfectly capable of walking around when not under the effects of a Sleeping Potion."

Poppy ignored the intended jab. "You certainly are not fine. Stand," she said challenging, and Harry narrowed his eyes. She didn't believe he could? Well then . . .

He ignored the burning pain in his legs and swallowed his cry of agony. Standing, he looked at Madam Pomfrey with a touch of smugness. "See, I can stand. So can I avoid the Hospital Wing?"

She huffed at him. "Standing proves nothing. And why are you so eager to evade my hospital?"

"Because I'll never get out again."

Madam Pomfrey glared indignantly at him, then swivelled to glare at Lupin and Dumbledore, whose eyes were alight with mirth.

"Who has been spreading tales about my hospital?" She demanded, and Harry smirked.

Abandoning her attempt to defend her Hospital, she looked at Harry. "Now listen here, young man. You're going to the Hospital whether you like it or not, even if I have to tie you up and drag you there myself!"

Only Snape saw their mysterious guest turn several shades paler.

"Fine," Harry said curtly, all previous amusement gone. He walked slowly to the office door, trying not to scream in pain. He turned around to see everyone staring at him.

"What?" He snapped sharply.

"How can you walk?" Madam Pomfrey asked squeamishly.

"What do you mean 'how can I walk'? Do you expect me to grow wings and fly?"

"Your leg is sort of, erm, mangled," Remus said sheepishly, and Harry looked at him, seriously peeved.

"It is not—" He stopped as his left leg twinged sharply, setting off a dozen different pains. "Fine. So it is. That's no reason to seem so horrified."

He rolled his eyes at them and opened the office door. 'So it does open from the inside,' he thought sarcastically, at his wit's end. He had been tortured, forced into taking Veritaserum, broke rules of magic, and was in a ruddy alternate universe. What else could go wrong?

Harry groaned. Stairs.

"I forgot the bloody stairs," he grumbled to himself, but apparently he was heard.

"Well," Snape said silkily from behind him, "if you would set aside you decidedly Gryffindorish pride, you could be Levitated down the stairs."

"Shut it, Snape," Harry said, looking around the door frame, and grinned slightly when he found a particular symbol. He pressed it, and the stairs silently turned into a ramp. He turned to look at Snape, smirking triumphantly.

He slowly started down the newly made ramp, and Madam Pomfrey easily caught up with him.

"Where did you get all those injuries?" Madam Pomfrey asked him.

'And the interrogation continues,' Harry thought. "I'm not exactly sure where, Madam Pomfrey. The location wasn't a top concern of mine."

She huffed in annoyance at his callous tone. "Fine, how did you get all those injuries?"

"Voldemort and thirty-odd Death Eaters," he responded calmly.

"What!" Madam Pomfrey asked confused, believing that he was probably associated with Voldemort in some way. "Why would they attack you?"

"Because I failed in a mission to kill the Minister." The medi-witch gasped. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, I am not a Death Eater. Honestly."

Narrowing her eyes in irritation. "Well, I can hardly blame them for attacking you now. You certainly are annoying, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so," Harry answered. "It's a gift of mine."

"You never answered the question," Madam Pomfrey maintained sternly, far from being distracted.

"Well, I could go off on this rant about how Voldemort has pretty much always wanted me dead, but the main reason was because I know where the Order meets. He has to be pretty stupid, thinking that I would be the Secret-Keeper, or that it wouldn't be under the Fidelius Charm," Harry answered, keeping to himself his knowledge that Veritaserum overrode the Fidelius Charm.

"Well, Mr. Oh-so-gifted," Madam Pomfrey said, feeling a little shaken by the revelations of the stranger limping next to her, "keep going to the Hospital Wing, since you seem to know how to get there. I need to go talk to Dumbledore."

She turned around and bustled back up the ramp, leaving Harry feeling slightly indignant.

"Oh, sure," he muttered out loud, "rub in the fact that you can run back and forth while I slowly get nowhere. Thanks a lot."

Sighing as he mentally catalogued how far he still had to go to reach the Hospital Wing, he called out, "Fawkes!"

At once, the flaming bird appeared, tilting its head curiously at him, as if asking what he wanted.

"I don't suppose you could give me a lift?" Harry asked bleakly. "I don't think I can make it back to the Hospital Wing."

Cocking his head intelligently, Fawkes flew up and landed on Harry's good shoulder, making both disappear into a moment of flame.

Chapter Two: Acts of Desperation and Revelation

Harry limped over to the bed, thinking rapidly. Should he tell them who he was, or come up with a new name, a new identity? Both had their good and bad sides, being able to avoid those who likened him to his parents, or keeping the name he had always had. He felt slightly guilty about entertaining the thought of changing his name, sort of like he was betraying his parents, so, after much inner debate, decide to keep his name.

'So, Harry Potter it is,' he thought tiredly, drifting off into a state of half-consciousness.

Harry suddenly shook himself awake, and got off the bed, walking toward Madam Pomfrey's collection of potions. A tiny bit curious as to if there were new potions in this world, Harry skimmed through the names, but didn't find any that he didn't recognize. Finding the potion he was looking for, Harry walked back to the bed and drank a dose of Dreamless Sleep Potion, vanishing the vial before the waves of sleep became irresistible.

It wouldn't be good for anyone to find out about his connection to Voldemort.

Madam Pomfrey stomped up the stairs to Dumbledore's office, barely acknowledging that the ramp had disappeared.

"Albus!" She yelled as she burst through the door. "Shame on you! I expect you to know better, having been headmaster at this school for twenty-seven years, and teaching for many before that! It's just common sense to give basic health care to anyone who comes to this school in need, and here you just set about questioning him! That's a blatant insult to me and my job, Albus! And you," she said turning on Severus, "I also expected to know better. I heal you after your missions, more often than is healthy, so you should know when or when not to give someone a basic pain potion!"

Snape just sneered at her. "There was nothing wrong with your charge. He was able to answer questions and make sarcastic

comments quite easily, therefore completely able to ask for a potion if he so desired. If his pride was so against it, he wasn't overly injured."

The mediwitch threw her hands up in frustration. "That boy was a prisoner of You-Know-Who for a month! Didn't he tell you anything about himself?"

"No," Albus answered, his eyes twinkling. "He gave all the right answers -- he told us next to nothing about himself and easily distracted us. We don't even know his name."

Fawkes chose this time to appear, trilling and flying once around the room before landing on his perch. The phoenix watched the conversation with interest and not a small bit of amusement.

"You don't even know his name?" Poppy asked incredulously. "But do you know anything else about him? How did he escape from You-Know-Who, and how did he end up here? And Severus, wouldn't you have recognized him?"

Albus chuckled at her list of questions. "That may be because our mysterious guest was never captured by this Voldemort."

Poppy narrowed her eyes, in no mood for Dumbledore's mind games. "Explain what you mean by 'this'."

"He's from an alternate universe," Remus explained, looking like he was trying to figure out the story for himself. "Somehow he resisted Veritaserum and breaking that rule of magic, got transported into this 'dimension' for lack of a better word."

"That's all you found out?" Poppy asked a tad disappointed.

Albus nodded, wanting to keep most of what the boy had said secret to all but Order members. The medi-witch shook her head and walked back down the stairs.

Harry woke up as he heard window blinds being opened. Moaning at the beam of light across his face, Harry burrowed his head under the

pillow, unwilling to get up. Then he suddenly sat straight up, remembering where he was.

Poppy laughed at his deer-in-the-headlights look and fly-away hair, even more so as he yawned and grumbled to himself.

Harry glared at the sunlight and vowed to wear sunglasses whenever he fell asleep. Trying to ignore a wave of dizziness, Harry raised his uninjured arm and tried to smooth down his hair, watching as the world spun. 'This must be a hangover feels like,' he thought to himself, then glared in the direction of the still snickering witch.

He cautiously put one foot on the ground, then both feet, and sighed as the room stopped its rollicking motion.

"What do you think you're doing?" Madam Pomfrey frowned and bustled up to his bed. "Get back on this bed this instant!"

Harry looked in her direction, and silently cursed his bad eyesight, knowing that he should have listened when Hermione told him to magically fix his eyes. He could just see blurry distant shapes, and wouldn't recognize the medi-witch if she hadn't spoken.

"Madam Pomfrey?" He asked questioningly.

"Yes, that is my name," Poppy answered. "Didn't you figure that out yesterday?"

He looked in her direction, but her trained eyes automatically noticed that his gaze was unfocused. "What's wrong with your eyes?"

"I lost my glasses," Harry responded, annoyed at himself.

Poppy snickered again. "You do know that you can magically fix your eyesight, right?" He glared in response. "Just a question."

Harry scowled. Still unsettled by the idea that no one here would recognize him. "What time is it?"

"5 o'clock in the evening," she responded. "Why?"

"It is normal to be awake earlier than that here, isn't it?" Harry asked in a cross between sarcasm and curiosity, wondering if anything would be drastically different here.

She scowled back at him, mirroring his look. "Yes, it is normal to be awake before now, but you need to pace yourself, young man. Going all night without any treatment, your injuries might be infected, and there you are, thinking that you're right as rain. What are you still doing standing up?"

Harry listened as her answer turned into a rant, and smiled inwardly. There was one person not any different. Madam Pomfrey was over-protective of her patients almost to the point of driving them insane. But, picking up on her annoyed look, shook himself out of his thoughts and sat back on the bed, knowing not to argue.

Without warning the door to the Hospital Wing flew open, and a man with scruffy black hair poked his head in.

"Poppy!" He yelled. "Dementor attack! Prepare for any casualties!"

With that short message, he hurriedly left again, leaving a pale Madam Pomfrey and Harry looking at the swinging door. Bustling into action, Madam Pomfrey gathered up vials of potion and large hunks of chocolate. She could feel a slight wave of cold in the room, and knew that it was a large attack for the Dementor effects to reach the Hospital Wing. Poppy was about to gather several blankets when an arm blocked her progress.

"Madam Pomfrey," Harry said, a strange glow in his eyes, "let me borrow your wand for a second."

"What?" She responded, somewhat hysterically. "I can't just let you borrow my wand. You're too far to help, and your magical reserves are too low..."

Despite her argument, the Mediwitch found herself taking her wand out anyway. He had a powerful quality about him, and, as she handed her wand to him, she couldn't help but hope he had a miracle.

"At least you didn't steal it this time," she said in her usual stern tone, and Harry grinned. Then he walked over to the Hospital Wing window, where the gray-cloaked figures and faint Patroni were visible, and summoned his happiest memory.

FLASHBACK

Hermione glared at Harry and Ron, who were currently playing Hangman rather than take History of Magic notes.

Harry grinned as the bookworm tried to ignore them and concentrate, only to glare at them once more. A sudden pointy elbow hit Harry in the side.

"Ouch!" He mouthed, glaring back at Hermione. "What was that for?"

"Pay attention!" She ordered silently. "And syllabus has two 'l's, not one."

Harry rolled his eyes and turned back to the game, inwardly commenting about how he couldn't care less about a goblin chief's rise to popularity and grumbling about his spelling. Hermione could always figure out what word he was using. He turned back only to see Ron watching Hermione dreamily.

Harry waved a quill in front of Ron's face, and laughed silently as the redhead's ears turned scarlet.

"Honestly, Ron," Harry said as Ron grinned sheepishly. "Just ask her out already."

Ron gulped. "Ask who out, Harry? What are you talking about?"

"Hermione, Ron. You both like each other, but she's waiting for you to ask her."

"Are you sure she likes me?" Ron asked nervously. "You not just joking, are you?"

Harry smirked. "You two look at each other all misty-eyed when you think the other isn't paying attention. Ask her before she gives up!"

Ron paled a little at that. "Well, Gryffindor courage forward," he mumbled. He leaned toward Hermione's desk.

"Hermione?" Ron asked hesitantly.

"Yes, Ronald?" Hermione said back, a bit frostily, not forgiving their apparent slacking off during class.

Ron gulped again, and looked and looked at Harry, who nodded confidently back.

"Will you go to Howgarts with me next weekend?" Ron asked Hermione, and he cringed, waiting for the explosion that never came. Hermione looked at him, eyes full of surprise, and she squealed. Jumping up and dropping her quill, she hugged a very relieved Ron, much to the rest of the class's amusement.

"Of course I'll go with you!" She said, and Ron smiled at her bashfully.

Professor Binns had never once stopped his lecture about Goblins.

END FLASHBACK

Harry smiled at the memory, and shouted, "Expecto Patronum Maxis!"

A wide beam of white light shot out of the borrowed wand, and lighted the grounds outside. Madam Pomfrey gasped as she could see the full horror of the scene below. Dementors swarmed nearly everywhere, their victims sprawled sparsely throughout the grounds, but no one had been Kissed--yet.

The Dementors were winning until they saw the beam of deadly white light headed in their direction. With unholy shrieks the demons started smoking and writhing, halting their attack.

Then the Dementors fled, not willing to stand up against the form of such a concentrated Patronus.

Madam Pomfrey watched as three glowing animals gamboled thorough the window and into the wing, and as the boy laughed when the stag head-butted a Grim-like dog. The dog shared a plotting look with the form of a werewolf and the two charged at the stag. After the impromptu wrestling match, the three patroni wagged their tails, even the stag, making Poppy grin, then they dissipated.

Now Madam Pomfrey looked at the stranger in shock at his feat of magic. Harry looked back at her, pale and shivering, and then gave her back her wand. She snapped out of her shock and stepped into Healer mode.

"Get back on the bed this instant!" She commanded, giving him a small smile, and he obeyed, sitting down just as the same messenger from before came barreling into the Hospital.

"Poppy, quick! We need all your chocolate down in the Great Hall!"

She nodded and scooped up the pile she had set down before.

"Is everyone okay?" Harry asked, worrying that he hadn't acted soon enough. "No one was Kissed, were they?"

"No, no, everyone is okay." Then the man had a double-take and looked at him in surprise. "Isn't it summer, Poppy? Why is there a student here?"

Poppy chuckled. "He's not a student."

The man looked at her for a second, and then turned back to the teenager. "Bloody Hell! What happened to you?"

"That's not really doing much to raise my confidence," Harry said with a smirk.

"Are you a Death Eater?" The blurry form asked bluntly, and Harry rolled his eyes and Madam Pomfrey smacked the man upside his head.

"Way to go, James. Real smooth. Of course he's not a Death Eater." She forced the chocolate into his arms and pointed towards the doorway. "Now shoo."

She shook her head as he left, and Harry looked at her questioningly. "Who was that?"

"You don't know him? Well, I guess your all-knowing powers couldn't last forever. That was James Potter, one of the biggest troublemakers you'll ever meet."

Harry froze, and his blood turned to ice. His father was alive? How was that possible... 'Wait,' Harry thought to himself, 'if Voldemort never fell here, then that means that Dad never died protecting Mum, and she never died to protect me.' Thoughts circled around his head. His parents, Cedric Diggory, Sirius, and countless others could still be alive.

The faint hope of a family that had come alive was returned to its grave when a cold, rational thought entered his mind. Harry knew he would have to go against Voldemort here. He had no doubt that the prophecy would still apply here. Besides, he would fight Voldemort anyway, putting any family here in more danger.

This meant that he couldn't be Harry Potter here. He wouldn't be allowed to fight with parents concerned about him, and wouldn't want to chance his parents being killed because of him again. . .

"Hey," Madam Pomfrey interrupted his thoughts, looking concerned. "Are you okay?"

'Damn,' Harry thought. 'I need to control my reaction better.'

"I'm fine," Harry responded. "Just tired."

The Mediwitch looked sternly at him. "Of course you are, young man. Doing spells, especially the Patronus Charm, when your magic levels are low. You should know better, destroying Dementors!"

"I didn't destroy them!" Harry said indignantly. "I just made them run away," he explained, stifling a yawn.

She pushed him so he was lying down on the bed. "You need to sleep, and stop your random acts of heroism."

Harry sighed but acquiesced. "You wouldn't happen to have any Dreamless Sleep Potion, would you?"

Madam Pomfrey frowned at him. "Yes I do, but you're going to become dependent on it if you don't sleep normally. And why was that the only Potion you took last night?"

Harry frowned back. "One: I'm not going to become dependent on it, I've been taking it for a year and haven't gotten addicted to it. I can manage to sleep without it, I would just prefer no to. Two: I'm unfamiliar with several of the pain potions you have, and didn't want to nullify the effects of the Sleeping Potion."

"But why did you want Dreamless Sleep Potion in the first place?" She asked, trying to get some background information on him.

"So I can sleep without dreams," Harry replied dryly, halting her obvious effort.

"I'm not going to get any answers, am I?" She asked plaintively, and Harry shook his head. "Fine. I can't give you two doses of Sleeping Potion in a row. And, as a warning, you're probably going to have to answer a lot of questions tomorrow."

The only answer she got was a groan, causing her to grin. She blew out the candles lighting the infirmary and left to see what was happening with the Order. She never saw her patient wave his hand, muttering a temporary eye repair charm.

Poppy walked down to the Great Hall, where people were sitting down and trying to rid themselves of the depressing feeling left by the Dementors. After making sure everyone would survive, she rushed up to Dumbledore.

"What happened?" She asked.

"There was a Dementor attack, as I'm sure you already know." Poppy nodded her head, waiting for him to continue. "We were losing when a white beam appeared and chased away the Dementors. I wish I knew what the spell was and where it came from. It wasn't just a Patronus."

"It was three," Poppy told him with a grin. It was fun to know things others didn't.

Albus looked at her shrewdly, waiting for an answer, and Madam Pomfrey said, "Your mysterious guest conjured it."

A voice right behind them made her jump. "What? That guy in the Hospital cast that spell? But he looked like Death warmed over!" James then frowned at the Headmaster.

Poppy ignored his last statement. "It was him, Albus. He said some variation of the charm and had three patroni, but I can't remember what they were. He seemed to completely disregard the fact that his magical reserves were almost empty."

"Curious," Albus said, his eyes twinkling. "How is he healing?"

"Healing?" James interrupted again. "You mean he looked worse?"

"Quiet, James," Poppy commanded sternly. "He's almost healed. I can't do anything about his scars, and his leg has to heal naturally, though I'm magically speeding up the process, before I can do anything." James winced at that, knowing personally how painful healing a broken bone the Muggle way could be. "But here's the oddest thing, Albus. He didn't take any pain potions last night, just Dreamless Sleep Potion, though he says he's not addicted. He said

he had been on it for a year, which means he's trying to block out something from before he was kidnapped."

Dumbledore sighed. "It seems that the more we find out about him, the less we know. He has a lot of explaining to do tomorrow. This would be much simpler if we knew his name."

"You don't know his name?" James interjected, looking curiously at Albus. "You really don't know anything about him? Well, you could always ask Sirius to heckle him for answers."

"Hey!" A 38-year-old with sweeping black hair walked up behind James and smacked him upside the head. "I do not heckle. I interrogate. So, who are you talking about, and why does he need to be heckled?"

Albus frowned at James who winced under the look. He did the only thing he could to make sure that Sirius wouldn't spill whatever he heard.

"Code 470 minor!" He barked, and at once Sirius sprang to alert and saluted James. His face was serious, a rare sight.

"Okay, what's the deal?" Sirius asked, and Albus smiled at this reminder of Marauder efficiency.

James turned to Dumbledore and Poppy to explain. "Neither of us will say anything, so what can we do?"

"The man in the hospital, you met him, I believe James, is most likely from an alternate universe, parallel to this one. Voldemort," no one in the small group winced, "exists in his world and our guest is a high target of his. Other than that, we know next to nothing about him."

"That's all you got?" Sirius asked with a grin. "You've finally met your match about keeping information hidden that you don't want others to know!" James smacked him upside the head at his unprofessional behavior, and Poppy added this evidence to her theory that all the Marauders had no feeling in their heads, which were debatably empty.

"Who all questioned them?" James asked, seeming to fall back on his Auror training.

"Myself, Remus, and Severus."

Sirius made a face. "No wonder he didn't say anything. He can't relate to you. You're too old, no offense, Snape's a git, all offense intended, and Remus is too polite to badger him. James and I could talk to him."

They both turned puppy (or stag) eyes to Albus. Curiosity made them want to talk to this mysterious dimension traveler. Albus looked unsure, but Madam Pomfrey solved the problem in her own blunt way. "I daresay that even you two won't be able to figure him out. I dare you to try, and I'll laugh as you two are bested."

At this James and Sirius drew themselves up haughtily. "I think not, madam," Sirius said, and they marched out of the Great Hall.

Madam Pomfrey turned to Albus. "My money's on the kid. As no one here is in danger, and chocolate is in the kitchens, I'm going to make sure my Hospital stays in one piece." She gathered her rustling skirt and hurried after the two Aurors.

The three adults arrived in the corridor heading to the Hospital Wing at the same time.

"Now listen, you two," Poppy said sternly, pointing an accusing finger at James and Sirius, "will not gang up on him, pull pranks, yell, or be your usual idiotic selves. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," they both said contritely, fooling no one.

Poppy sighed and shook her head, letting them walk forward. Sirius had one hand on the door, when he suddenly stopped. They all heard the sounds of laughter, which did not fit Poppy's image of the stranger at all. She stepped past Sirius, and walked into the wing.

At once the laughter stopped, though the figure on the hospital bed still had a broad grin on his face, which looked eerily out of place on

his scar-covered face and blood-soaked hair. She muttered a scourgify charm and all the blood was gone.

"There," she said. "You might heal faster without all that blood in your hair--" As soon as she said this, Harry burst into laughter, though this time he smothered it in his pillow.

James and Sirius followed Poppy in, giving him dubious looks as if fearing for his sanity. However, Madam Pomfrey looked curious rather than cautious. "And what, may I ask, is so amusing?" Harry got a hold of himself and grinned at her.

"Your Voldemort has hair!" At once he cracked up again.

Poppy was confused. "Why is that amusing and how did you find that out now?"

Still highly amused, Harry answered her question, the first one at least. "The Voldemort here looks human, well, except for his eyes. And isn't he supposed to be old by now? He still looks forty!" He broke into laughter again, though much calmer. "Merlin, if I ever get back to my dimension, I'm sending Voldemort a wig!"

James and Sirius grinned at this. A man after their own heart...

Harry noticed just at that moment the people behind Madam Pomfrey, and his eyes widened. Sirius and his father. Alive. 'No,' he thought to himself, 'You can't act like you know them, except maybe by name.' Harry felt his determination to go by another identity double. 'They will not die because of me again,' he thought.

Harry was wondering how to introduce himself when the Marauders took the problem out of his hands.

"So," Sirius said, bounding onto the chair next to Harry's bed, "am I famous in your world? Ravishingly good-looking?"

"Erm," Harry started, trying to come up with believable answers. "I wouldn't know, Mr. Black. I don't think we've really met before," Harry said as unemotionally as possible.

"First of all, call me Sirius," the dog Animagus said mock-sternly. "None of this Mr. Black stuff. Secondly, how do you know my name, if we've never met?"

Harry smirked. "I assume the Marauders didn't just exist in my world."

Sirius paused, then brightened. "Good! Now you can tell me your name!"

Harry's eyes narrowed at this. Had Dumbledore sent them, or had they just come out of curiosity? It was then that Harry's attempt at wandlessly fixing his eyes completely healed his vision.

He blinked, seeing clearly for the first time in quite a while, and he almost gasped at the differences. He could see his father clearly for the first time, but Harry still thought that he didn't look that much like him now that his hair was long. Harry hoped that no one would see any possible similarities between them. Sirius was nothing like the one he knew. This one looked the same as the one in Harry's picture of his parents' wedding, not like the Sirius who had lived in Grimmauld Place in hiding. Even the eyes were different. One pair glittered with mischief, and the other had been haunted from Azkaban.

Harry shook himself out of his thoughts. "Do you believe 'purebloods' are better than 'half-bloods' or Muggleborns?" Harry asked them in response to Sirius's question.

"No," James said, looking offended at the question.

Sirius had the same look. "No. After all, without Muggles, who would have invented Pop Tarts?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at this, but didn't comment. "Good," said Harry. "My name is Chris Collins."

James looked confused. "Er, why did you need to know our opinions about blood?"

"Because I'm Muggleborn," Harry responded, weaving his identity as he went. "In my world, I had an unfortunate habit of making enemies by insulting certain purebloods."

Sirius piped up at this. "Who were they? I bet they exist here . . ."

He trailed off as Harry's eyes hardened, looking almost black. "They were Death Eaters. I have no doubt that they exist here."

James smacked Sirius at this. "Way to go, Padfoot," he muttered. Harry yawned discreetly, as Sirius muttered a comment back, trying to hide his exhaustion, but Madam Pomfrey saw it anyway.

"You two--out," she ordered, pointing at James and Sirius. "And you," she said, pointing at Harry, "sleep. No more magic business until your reserves are full. Got it?"

Harry nodded automatically, wishing he could sleep normally, if not peacefully.

James and Sirius walked to Dumbledore's office, where the Headmaster was sure to be now.

"That was interesting." James said dryly, unhappy that they hadn't found out more. "We found out his name and that he has a rather twisted sense of humor. Hurrah for us."

They had turned the corner and Dumbledore's gargoyle was in sight when Sirius answered him. "Don't think about it like that, Prongs. We found out that he's paranoid, Muggleborn, a fighter for the light, his name, that his world's Voldemort doesn't have hair, and he has some weird ability that let him see what this world's Voldemort looks like."

James blinked. For once Sirius was right. Sirius grinned at James's gob smacked look and said the password. They opened the door to Dumbledore's office to find Lily arguing with Albus.

"What do you mean my husband is on a secret mission? James, Sirius, Remus, and even Severus know something that I don't.

Probably even Peter knows whatever it is by now, so if you don't spill it right this instant, you will regret it!"

Sirius coughed loudly at this point and both Albus and Lily turned towards them. Lily's face was red to rival her hair and Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling, although he was a bit pale.

"Reporting partially successful task, Albus," James said, standing at attention, intending to further irk his wife. "Unfortunately we can not share the information near," he shifted his gaze to Lily, "civilians."

"James Potter!" Lily shrieked, marching up to him. "I can't find you after a Dementor attack, and then everyone says you're on a secret mission!" Smack! "Now, you tell me what is going on, or so help me..."

Sirius grinned, watching the familiar sight of Lily ordering around James. "Hey Lily."

"Shut it, Black," she growled in response.

This would have escalated into a full-out war if Dumbledore hadn't interrupted them. "James, what did he say?"

"I could put the memory in a Pensieve," James answered, "but as Sirius interpreted it, his name is Chris Collins, he's Muggleborn, and fighter for the Light. Those were the facts. What he concluded is that Collins is paranoid, has a very strange sense of humor, and has some way of seeing this world's Voldemort."

"Don't forget," Sirius interjected, "that his world's Voldemort is bald!"

Dumbledore looked thoughtful at this new information, while Lily looked like she was going to explode.

"Who is Chris Collins, why is he here, and what do you mean 'his world's Voldemort is bald'?"

Dumbledore sighed. People said that he was in charge. "Sit down, Lily, and we'll explain everything. Last night Remus and Severus

were patrolling when an unknown person suddenly appeared, having horrible injuries. He was levitated to the Hospital Wing, where he asked to not be forced into taking Veritaserum. Madam Pomfrey refused to break his request, so she grudgingly let Remus, Severus, and myself bring him to this office to question him. He did not say much besides maintaining that he was not a Death Eater. Madam Pomfrey came up here, demanding for her patient, and the only other information we knew before the Dementor attack was that he is from an alternate universe. When the Dementors attacked, he borrowed Poppy's wand and cast a variation of the Patronus Charm, which was what saved us. Then James and Sirius questioned him, and got the answers that you just heard."

Lily didn't look convinced. "You still haven't explained this 'bald Voldemort' story."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "I'd be quite interested in knowing this as well. You haven't explained how that particular conversation topic came up, Mr. Black."

Sirius grinned, and told what had happened when they first walked into the Hospital Wing. Lily snorted at the tale, and Albus's eyes twinkled.

James interjected, "But there was also something weird about him. He looked at Sirius like he recognized him, but said that he didn't."

Sirius looked startled. "He recognized me. I am famous in his world!"

James and Lily rolled their eyes at him while Albus chuckled.

"Well, Mr. Collins is certainly a mystery. We'll have to ask him some more tomorrow, though I don't think we'll get past Poppy very easily."

"That won't be necessary," James said cheerfully. "From what I could tell, he's scheming to break out of the Hospital Wing."

Chapter 3: Reactions of Suspicion

James Potter was right in assuming that Harry was trying to get out of the Hospital Wing.

He had always hated the stark, white walls, and he wanted to think about this alternate universe without being surrounded by them. He thought it was unnecessary to use wandless magic to escape (not to mention incredibly reckless), but his only other option couldn't be implemented until Madam Pomfrey left.

In his sixth year Harry had discovered multiple passages throughout the castle that responded to Parseltongue, no doubt an extension of the Chamber of Secrets. One such passage connected the Hospital Wing to a corridor near the staff's quarters. However, he didn't want anyone to know about the tunnels, and he certainly didn't want anyone to know he was a Parselmouth, so he waited to make his escape, acting as if he had no plan to escape.

When he was pretending to be asleep to fool Madam Pomfrey, he actually did fall asleep, still exhausted from his injuries and lack of sleep. Madam Pomfrey watched her patient fall asleep. He was good at trying to seem asleep, she gave him that. She had been almost fooled, except she believed that his sleep wouldn't be so peaceful.

Surely enough, his breathing deepened, and he restlessly turning back and forth. He began muttering in his sleep, but it was so low she had to lean forward to hear him whisper, "Kill the spare."

She threw herself back in horror. 'Kill the spare?' What kind of past did this Chris Collins have: did he kill someone or watch someone be killed? She had absolutely no idea, and started in surprise when the sleeping form moaned, half-rising from the bed before falling silently into a deeper sleep.

Deciding to not tell anyone what she had heard, Madam Pomfrey walked to her quarters to sleep, still thinking about her mysterious new patient.

Harry woke suddenly about an hour before dawn, cursing himself for falling asleep. But a quick look around the Hospital Wing told him that Madam Pomfrey was still in her room.

Quickly standing up, a part of his brain realized that most of his injuries were much better. His leg, however, refused to support much weight.

He walked as best as he could to the far part of the wall and hissed, "Open."

A stone passageway appeared, looking damp and musty from disuse and Harry quickly entered it, watching it seal itself automatically.

Madam Pomfrey walked into the Hospital half an hour later. "Well, Mr. Collins, I think that--"

She stopped as she realized that she was the only person in the Hospital Wing, but, as she checked the window and door, she knew the ever-present charms on them had not been broken, charms that she had always left on the doors so no students would sneak in or out.

Bolting to the door, she unlocked it and ran to Dumbledore's office. Hurriedly telling the gargoyle 'chocolate frog,' she burst into the office. "Albus!" she exclaimed in a panic, never having lost a patient before. "Collins is gone!"

Dumbledore just chuckled, knowing that James had been right.

Harry stumbled through the rough passageway, grumbling slightly to himself. His injuries may have been healing, but he could still barely walk.

He groaned as his foot snagged yet another loose stone lying haphazard across the passageway, and fell clumsily to the ground. Maybe leaving the Hospital Wing was a bad idea, but he would have gone insane if he were in there any longer.

Looking around for inspiration, Harry saw an out-of-place wooden beam not far down the musty tunnel. Grabbing it, he leaned on it to

stand up, and continued walking, thinking about the insurmountable difficulty he had gotten himself into by somehow traveling across dimensions.

After a while he reached the end of the tunnel, and hissing, "Open," once more, stepped into an empty hallway.

He sighed in relief at getting out of the musty passageway, and felt victorious that he had successfully escaped Madam Pomfrey's grasp. He had stepped around a corner when he heard a low, threatening voice behind him.

"Escaped, did you?"

Lily and James Potter were walking around the halls of Hogwarts early the next morning. Both were required to wake early due to their jobs, and they saw no reason to break the habit because of summer.

As they passed the infamous Moaning Myrtle's bathrooms, near Lily's quarters as a member of the staff, she brought up the subject of Chris Collins.

"I wish I knew what spell she used!" She pouted to her husband in frustration.

Her pride and gift was Charms, she taught useful offensive Charms in conjunction to Professor Flitwick's regular Charms, and she didn't like not knowing spells that a, by her husband's estimate, nineteen- or twenty-year-old knew. James chuckled at her, and was promptly elbowed in the side.

"Don't worry, Lily," he said, still grinning, "I'm sure you'll be able to beat it out of him sometime."

The unhurried couple continued their conversation, moving from the mysterious Collins to their children. Rose, the youngest, was only nine, and so wouldn't be going learning at Hogwarts just yet, even though she lived there in the staffs' rooms. Holly their oldest, was starting fifth year, already obsessing over the OWLs.

Since the castle was temporarily the Order's headquarters, the whole Potter family was staying at Hogwarts, as were many other members. Neither of them mentioned the son who would have been going into his seventh year, who had died almost sixteen years previous.

The peaceful silence between the two of them was broken when a rhythmic thumping reached both their ears.

Immediately on alert, they slowly poked their heads around the corner of the hallway to see the back of a person with slightly long, ragged, black hair limping down the hallway away from them.

James turned to Lily and mouthed, "Collins."

She nodded, and then frowned. "Shouldn't he be in the Hospital Wing?" She silently asked back, and James grinned at her. Obviously he had escaped the medi-witch's clutches, as foretold by James.

He put a finger to his lips and softly tread to right behind Collins, putting his Auror training to good use. When James was directly behind him, he said loudly, "Escaped, did you?" in a cold voice.

Lily had rolled her eyes, knowing that her husband was up to no good, but gasped as Collins froze, then spun around penning James to the wall with his walking stick. For an instant there was a wary, defiant look on his face, but it went away, leaving Harry looking apologetic as he recognized James and released him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter. I didn't know it was you," Harry said, inwardly thinking that his dad deserved a good punch on the face for frightening him like that.

James just waved his apology away, still looking rather pale. "Well, at least I know not to sneak up on you anymore," James responded, only half-joking and chucking weakly.

Harry leaned over to pick up his fallen walking stick. "To answer your question," he said, "I did indeed escape."

His face and voice was emotionless, but there was a touch of smugness in his manner. Harry suddenly caught sight of Lily, and he almost fell over in shock.

He had known that she was alive, but actually seeing the person he had only heard pleading for his life was completely different. If Snape or Dumbledore walked by at that moment, Harry would not have been able to shut his Occlumency shields. Lily was speechless as the strange young man gazed at her sorrowfully. She found herself staring back, unable to move.

James was rather confused, but took the initiative anyway.

"Collins," he said in introduction, "this is my wife, Lily. Lily, this is Chris Collins, the strange person who travels between worlds."

Harry rolled his eyes and snapped out of his mind lock.

"Sorry about that," Harry said emotionless once more. "You looked like someone I had known." 'Recognized, but never really knew,' he thought sadly, knowing that he wouldn't really know her here, either.

Lily smiled at him, and then frowned severely. "You ran away from the Hospital Wing?" She scolded, seeming to suddenly tower over him. "You probably have frightened poor Poppy out of her mind and no doubt the Order will be searching the castle. If it weren't for the fact that James would just help you create another escape plan, I'd march you back to the Hospital Wing right now!"

Her rant was interrupted by running feet above them.

"Where is he?" A distant voice yelled, and with a thrill of apprehension Harry recognized the voice as Moody's. Harry did not want to be found by a hunting Moody. "The wards weren't touched! If it weren't for the fact that he couldn't possibly be able to walk that far in the castle, I'd say he was already gone!"

Harry scowled at that. "I'm perfectly capable of walking around the castle, thank you very much," he muttered, making James grin.

His mutterings subsided he heard the ex-Auror clunking down a near flight of stairs. Muttering curses that made Lily frown disapprovingly, Harry hurriedly limped off, noting with growing irritation that his parents were calmly walking after him, easily keeping up.

"One-legged race," James muttered to Lily, commenting on the fact that both Moody and Harry had a useless leg apiece.

Harry heard him and reached his walking stick back to stomp on his foot in irritation. Lily giggled as James winced, and the two paused as Harry turned the corner.

"We can wait for Mad-Eye," James said, rubbing his foot, and Lily nodded. "That corridor is a dead-end."

Soon enough, Moody came barreling around the corner, screeching to a halt as he saw the two Potters.

He glared at them, his usual mode of greeting. "Have you seen Collins anywhere? You, lad," he said, pointing to James, "You know what he looks like."

James chuckled, making the ex-Auror scowl. "Yeah, Moody," James said. "He just hobbled around the corner, but the passage is a dead-end."

Moody clunked around the corner, followed by the Potters. The hallway had no one in it, and no doors of escape.

Moody turned to James, and roared, "You're supposed to be an Auror? You never let someone out of your sight!"

James winced. "But there is no way for someone to leave this hallway," he said in his defense. "There're no secret passages down there!"

Moody rolled his eyes at him in obvious irritation. "Never suppose anything, Potter," Moody lectured. "Because apparently there is. **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**"

Shaking his head and muttering about the falling standards of Aurors, Mad-Eye clunked off, leaving a disgruntled James and a grinning Lily behind.

Harry looked around the tunnel, full of dread at where it had led him to.

'Damn,' he thought crossly. 'Of all the places for that tunnel to go, it just had to be the dungeons.' There was no doubt in his mind that Snape still haunted this part of the castle, and a close muttering voice proved him right.

"Should have just Stunned him and been done with it, but the idiot boy has to disappear, wasting all our time as a search party."

Harry did some quick thinking. The only part of the castle that he really needed to examine was the Chamber of Secrets, which even he couldn't deny that he wasn't in the condition to do so, making the next important thing discovering the history of this place.

Seeing his mum had shaken him enough, and he had already suspected that she was alive. Next thing he knew, Bellatrix Lestrange would be in the Order. He should probably let himself be found, but being caught by Snape? Not even he was as reckless as that.

But soon he caught sound of the voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt. Kingsley, on the other hand, could be reasoned with.

"At least we're not partnered with Mad-Eye, Severus," the Auror was saying. "Now that would be something to complain about."

Making up his mind, Harry wandlessly conjured a white cloth and he tied it to the end of his walking stick. Sensing that the two were about to walk by, he hastily stuck his walking stick out about chest-height, making it look like a flag.

"I surrender!" He called, and to his amusement he heard whispered curses of surprise, and he waited calmly, leaning on his lowered walking stick, until they had their wands pointed at him.

"Took you a while," Harry commented lazily. "Shouldn't you two be better prepared than that? You are hunting down an unknown entity."

Snape sneered at him and pointed his wand threateningly at Harry's throat. Harry continued, making himself have a slightly Dean-Thomas-like personality. As Dumbledore hid behind his grandfatherly act, Harry hid behind the personalities of different people.

"Are we off to Dumbledore's office?" Harry asked. "No time like the present to find out more about the history of here."

Both adults bristled at this, and Snape brandished his wand even more threateningly, though Harry didn't even spare it a glance.

"I don't believe you're in a place to make inquiries, Collins," Snape said dangerously.

Kingsley stepped behind Harry, and he had to fight his instincts not to treat the well-known Auror like a threat. Shacklebolt pressed his wand into the back of Harry's neck.

"Get moving, Collins," he growled. "We won't wait for an excuse to Stun you."

Harry glared at him, bristling at the threat in return. "Hello to you, too, Shacklebolt."

"How the Hell do you know who I am, kid?" The rather suspicious-looking Auror asked, but Harry merely grinned and started walking down the dungeon's hallway with the help of his walking stick, which made a loud, echoing bang every time it hit the floor, causing Snape to glare at him.

"Is there any way you could possibly keep quiet?" The Potions Master demanded, ill at ease with a stranger who knew the castle so well, alternate dimension or no.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Don't worry, Professor. Anyone nearby will hear my walking stick, think that Moody is near, then run in the opposite direction. It's very unlikely that we'll come across anyone."

Kingsley chuckled at this apt description of the ex-Auror, while Snape merely scowled.

"So, where are we going?" Harry asked, and smirked when he heard the grunted response of "Albus's office." "Which is where I wanted to be in the first place," Harry said softly, thinking that the situation was similar to a story he had heard one time via Hermione. 'Something about chocolate cake and grapefruit juice,' he thought distractedly, before shaking himself out of his thoughts as the small group reached the gargoyles.

Harry began to limp up the stairs, but Kingsley pulled Snape back. "Who is this guy? How does he know his way around the castle and everything?"

Snape didn't sneer at the question. He was bemused by the concept of alternate universes. Instead, he merely said, "That is for the Headmaster to divulge."

Then he swept up the staircase, followed by an irked and muttering Kingsley.

When he got to Albus's office, he saw Collins talking to Dumbledore. "The castle seems to be the same in majority. Has there been a mysterious attack on the students, some time within the last ten or fifteen years?"

Albus looked curiously at the enigma in front of him, and responded, "Not that I'm aware of. The Weasley twins were widely considered more of a plague more than a concentrated attack."

Harry's lips quirked at that, but he felt mournful about the death of the twins in his world, though the pair here were surely still alive. He shook himself and paid attention to what Dumbledore was now saying.

"Poppy is not particularly amused by your escape, though James was quite thrilled with reminding her that you are her first successful escapee. Though, I daresay that you shouldn't have slipped off like

that. Seeing how most inhabitants of the castle would stun you on sight."

Harry narrowed his eyes slightly. Dumbledore seriously wanted to know what Harry was up to, and, despite knowing how manipulative the old Headmaster could be, Harry gave his reason anyway. "I needed to see the castle, Professor. If I asked for the answers I needed, you would have a very strange insight into my past. I would rather nobody get a clear insight."

Albus nodded at his answer. The challenge between the two of them was sealed. "I don't suppose you would be willing to tell me why you questioned about a mysterious attack."

Harry grinned. "It's on a need-to-know basis, Professor. And you don't need to know."

Snape's resolve not to hex Collins seemed to snap at this. "You, Collins," he demanded, looking every inch the angry Death Eater. "How can we trust you, with such a resolve to hide your past? You suddenly appear, assuming we'll swallow your story about an alternate dimension, and then have complete knowledge of everything going on! Tell me, if you truly aren't a Death Eater, are you acting under threat of capture of someone you love, or are you so desperate you'd cut off your right arm for power?"

Harry paled at that question, and Snape sneered, knowing that he had won. But the pressure in the room suddenly increased until the windows blew outward in a magical force.

Harry found himself with both hands wrapped around Snape's neck, pushing him up against the wall. "Don't you ever accuse me of being a Death Eater," Harry snarled in a deadly whisper, cowing even Shackbolt and Dumbledore. "I have given all I have to fight Voldemort and will continue doing so, even if it means siding with you. But if you ever think I would side with him again, Merlin himself will not be able to help you."

Harry released Snape, his eyes still burning with rage as the windows repaired themselves and a tense silence filled the room, until James came bounding into the office.

"Hey, Albus, Lily said that--" He stopped when he saw Harry. "Caught, were you?" he asked, grinning mischievously, and Harry nodded, his ire still raised at Snape.

Harry decided to drop his act, having it pretty much blown, and acted like his normal self, slightly cold and defensive. "Yes. I can't search anymore until my leg is healed, which will take a while. Speaking of taking a while," Harry thought suddenly, "since I'm here in this universe, would it be possible for me to enroll here?"

Harry would rather not reveal his age and waste time with school when he should be fighting, but Voldemort was hardly going to be defeated on sixth-year knowledge.

"Of course," Dumbledore replied, thinking that Harry's school career must have been interrupted by the war. The headmaster, along with Severus and James, believed Harry to be in his twenties.

"Wait a second," James said incredulously. "You never finished school? But you're about twenty years old!" Harry smirked at his guess, but only Albus saw him, and he noticed the smirk get wider as Snape scoffed.

"Don't be ridiculous, Potter," Snape argued back dismissively. "He has to be older than that to be such a target of the Dark Lord, immature though he may be."

Harry outright laughed at that, knowing that he wouldn't be able to keep his age a secret for very long anyway.

"Do I really look that old?" Harry asked, as James and Severus froze with perplexed looks on their faces. "I just turned seventeen a couple days ago!"

Even Kingsley chuckled at the look on James's face. Snape had his usual sneer in place.

"Then why are you such a high target for old snake-face?" James asked, his curiosity coming forward. "How long has he been after you?"

Harry's face hardened and his grin fell. "Long enough," he said, refusing to say anymore.

Not one to be rebuffed, James remembered Lily's burning question. "Oh, Lily wanted to know what spell you used against the Death Eaters. She's upset that she didn't know what it was."

"It's a form of the Patronus Charm," Harry answered. "It's a variation that I came up with, but it only seems to work for me." At the skeptical look he got, Harry continued. "I have absolutely no idea why it works like that, but it is more powerful than the original, so it's the one I use."

Harry trailed off, looking around the office. Something was missing-- 'Ah,' he thought, realizing what it was. Gryffindor's sword wouldn't be here, seeing as Harry had never pulled it out of the Sorting Hat.

Harry turned back to see the three looking at him expectantly. "Sorry," he said. "Can you repeat that?"

Snape tsked his tongue in annoyance but answered. "The Headmaster was merely commenting on the fact that you need to get acquainted with this world's history. Since you can't seem to lower yourself to tell us your own so as to be told the differences, I suggest visiting the school library."

Harry rolled his eyes at Snape. "You really are a git, Professor."

James snorted in amusement, and Snape leveled a glare at him.

"Well," Harry said, "I would say that I'm off to the library, but people, especially Moody, are still hunting me. It looks like I'm stuck here until they give up."

Dumbledore had a thoughtful expression on his face, and spoke. "Well, I can use this time to introduce you to Fawkes. It will put to rest any misgivings people have about you."

"Fair enough," Harry responded, glaring at Snape, who glared back.

Dumbledore called Fawkes, and the majestic bird appeared.

Fawkes cried out angrily upon seeing Harry and held out his talons dangerously. Harry almost groaned at Fawkes, not believing that the supposedly Light creature (Harry was doubting any such thing at the moment) would do this. The phoenix had once pulled this before during Harry's sixth year, making Dumbledore think that Harry was a Death Eater in disguise, and this one was doing the exact same thing.

Harry watched with a mixture of trepidation and amusement as everyone pulled out their wands. Just as Dumbledore was about to fire a spell, Fawkes calmed down and landed lightly on Harry's shoulder, trilling happily.

Harry glanced down at the phoenix in some irritation. "Was that really necessary, Fawkes? You're supposed to be a Light creature, not sadistic."

The four other wizards looked scandalized that Harry was talking to Fawkes in such a manner, but the bird but just trilled smugly and cuffed Harry on the head with a wing as he flew away.

"Wait a second," Harry said in comprehension. "How did you know that the other Fawkes pulled that before?"

Fawkes twittered at him and Harry scowled. "Fine. I'm in way over my head. No reason to rub it in."

"You can understand Fawkes?" James asked, and after Harry nodded, asked, "You don't he would want to help with a couple pranks, do you?"

Harry grinned but didn't have a chance to answer before Fawkes's eyes widened comically and he disappeared in a flash of fire.

"I think that that would be a solid 'no,' Potter," Snape sneered, to which James stuck his tongue out.

"You call me immature," Harry muttered under his breath loud enough for everyone to hear. "You two are the very epitome of maturity!"

The two opened their mouths to respond but Dumbledore interrupted before a fight got under way.

"I believe that we have no option but to trust Fawkes's judgment," the old wizard said, his eyes twinkling at his familiar's rather unusual manner.

"Oh, goody," Harry said sarcastically. "Maybe now Moody won't hex me on sight!"

"Yes, now he'll just wait until you open your mouth and insult him," Kingsley said, and Harry looked at him innocently.

"I'm hurt. You've only known me for a quarter of an hour and already think I'm incapable of holding my tongue."

"Don't even bother acting innocent, Collins," Snape replied. "I've known you since you got here and I've come to the same conclusion."

James sounded his whole-hearted agreement, and Dumbledore also nodded his head at the irate seventeen-year-old.

"Fine," Harry grumbled, knowing it would be an argument he would lose. His thoughts wandered off to what he found out the first night he came here, wondering what gaps in his knowledge he would have to fill. Blinking in surprise, Harry realized something.

"Professor," he said, looking at Dumbledore, "do you know Voldemort's real name?"

Albus looked at him curiously. "No, I don't believe I do. Why, is it something rather important?"

"No," Harry answered bemusedly. How could Dumbledore not know Voldemort was Tom Riddle? That was the Headmaster's trademark: annoying Voldemort by calling him Tom. "It's not overly important, just passingly amusing. At least, I think it's the same person here...I'm not exactly sure if some events are the same..." Harry trailed off.

Coming to a decision, Harry stood. "Castle-wide game of hide-and-seek or no, I'm going to the library. There are too many things I need to find out."

James jumped up, too. "I'll go with you, that way they won't be as inclined to hex you."

"That gives me so much confidence, you have no idea," Harry replied sarcastically as he walked down the steps. He didn't see Kingsley's completely gob smacked look at Dumbledore.

"What the Hell was that? Seems like a miniature tornado just swept through and then left merrily."

"Indeed," Albus replied absently, his mind stuck on the possibility of knowing Voldemort's identity. "Indeed."

"What do you need to look up?"

Harry sighed. He had almost gotten used to the knowledge that his father was alive, along with Sirius and his mum. Of course, part of that might have happened because James Potter still acted like a teenager rather than the loosest idea of an adult.

"Well," Harry responded, knowing not to tell the truth. "I need to determine facts about the differences in the war," well, that was the truth, "see if there are any different spells or potions here," that really wasn't a lie either, but it wasn't on the top of the list, "and research ways to get home." As much as the last one would have been helpful, Harry remembered enough about Hermione's essay that it wasn't possible.

"What, so eager to leave already--"

"CHRIS COLLINS!" James and Harry both winced as the force of nature that was Madam Pomfrey walked towards them.

"WHAT do you think you were doing, Mr. Collins? Leaving the Hospital Wing, walking around, escaping from the Hospital Wing ..."

Harry almost grinned as the irate Medi-witch began to repeat herself, but narrowed his eyes as James snickered. "I'm sorry, Madam Pomfrey, but Mr. Potter here showed me an easy passageway out of the Hospital Wing and..."

He paused so Madam Pomfrey could summon another round of fury as James gaped accusingly at Harry. "You lie!" James accused, but was cut off.

"Shame on you, Mr. Potter. You should know better than to submit Mr. Collins to all your marauding tricks, especially while he is still injured!"

James just stood there glaring at Harry throughout the lecture. "You're going to pay for that, Collins," he growled.

"Pay for what?" Harry said sweetly, smirking at him nonetheless.

Madam Pomfrey began to bustle Harry towards the Hospital Wing while James pulled a mirror out of his pocket.

"Padfoot?" He said, and an image of Sirius Black appeared.

"Yeah, Prongs?"

"You know Collins broke out of the Hospital Wing, right?" He got a nod in response. "The little bugger blamed me for it!"

Sirius chuckled and James pretended to frown severely. "That invokes the wrath of the Marauders."

"Yeah, yeah," Sirius responded. "I gotta go. Go nurse your wounded pride."

James was left glaring at an empty mirror.

"Mr. Collins, since this little escapade of yours has probably set back your healing, you are going to stay here-- Sit! -- and drink this potion!"

Harry rolled his eyes but submitted. The month-long capture by the Death Eaters had left him physically weak, and he was too tired to argue, not that it would have done much good.

He drank the potion, shuddering at the awful taste and slowly fell asleep, not noticing that his scar began to prick as he did so.

Severus Snape, in the confines of his dungeons, hissed as his Dark Mark suddenly burned. Putting a Stasis Charm on the developmental potion he was half-finished with, he hurriedly grabbed his Death Eater mask and cloak.

Only bothering to implement a couple of his several locking charms, Snape ran towards the Entrance Hall and the Apparation point outside the Hogwarts wards.

Ch. 4 – Welcoming Committee

Harry gasped into a state of consciousness, sitting straight up as he felt the images of what he had just seen burn onto his brain. Shivering, he rose up his hands and was relieved to see that they were no longer pale and white, as those of both Voldemorts' were.

Memories of that vision crossed in front of his eyes. A man, a Squib or Muggle he wasn't sure, yelling defiantly at Voldemort . . . that same man, weeping in front of a small child's body . . . that same man now dead, his face blank and emotionless as the Death Eaters laughed.

Disgust rose like bile in his throat while the images flashed in his mind. The memory of feeling Voldemort's emotions: the sadistic joy, anger, and black power.

Feeling unclean and dark, he hastily wiped the sweat off his forehead as he heard someone approaching the Hospital. He was feeling infinitely grateful that Madam Pomfrey had set the Silencing Charm on him, though he knew that he might have to tell Dumbledore, somehow, what he saw.

The door opened, and he saw two bickering girls walk in, one looking nearly hysterical and angry, and looked about nine, while the other, ('the older one,' he thought) looked guilty.

"Madam Pomfrey!" the older one called, while the younger stood there, holding her hand close to her chest.

"Yes?" Madam Pomfrey called, and all three heard her bustling up through the corridor. "If that is you again, Mr. Collins, I swear—"

She stopped as she saw the two girls, and glanced at Harry, who shrugged back with his eyebrows raised.

"What have you two gotten yourselves into now?"

"Madam Pomfrey, I was practicing the Separation Spell, which is going to be on OWLs this year, and Rose stepped into the pathway of

it, and . . .” said the older girl, sounding a little like Hermione to Harry, who grinned to himself.

“I did not!” The younger girl exclaimed. “You just can’t aim properly, Holly. Even Snicky is better than you!”

Harry sniggered silently at this. He had no idea what or who “Snicky” was, but apparently it was someone who was notorious for bad aim.

The older one (‘Holly’ Harry thought) huffed at that comment. She glanced around and saw him. “Who is that Madam Pomfrey?”

“Hmmm?” Madam Pomfrey said distractedly, examining the other girl’s hand which seemed to have lost its fingers.

Harry took this opportunity to get rid of Madam Pomfrey’s Silencing Charm. Waving his hand at Holly, he pointed to himself and mouthed ‘Finite Incantatem’ very clearly. She nodded to show that she understood, and glancing at the Medi-witch to make sure she wasn’t paying attention, pointed her wand at him and muttered the spell.

Harry smiled at her. “Thank you. My name is Chris Collins.”

Holly glanced around the Hospital Wing. She couldn’t believe that she had accidentally charmed off Rose’s finger. Granted, her little sister shouldn’t have ran right in front of her when she was practicing spells, but still, she, Holly, should have been more careful.

She jumped out of her thoughts when she saw an unknown person sitting on a Hospital bed. ‘He looks rather dreadful,’ she thought to herself. Covered in scars and almost deathly pale, he also had this slightly feral look about him that didn’t look right on someone about her own age, maybe a couple years older.

She was slightly startled by the intensity of his look and the way he seemed to stare at her and know all her secrets. He seemed trustworthy yet dangerous, and she wondered if someone like him was what was meant by her mother’s thought of a Slytherin-Gryffindor.

She jumped out of her thoughts when he started signaling to her. 'Can't he talk?' she thought to herself. But she looked at his injuries. 'Maybe not . . .'

He wanted her to take off a spell it seemed like, so making sure Madam Pomfrey wasn't paying attention, she muttered "Finite Incantatem."

Immediately he gave a small smile, which seemed very out of place with his hard eyes and scarred face. "Thank you," he said in a scratchy voice. "My name is Chris Collins."

Madam Pomfrey whipped around at his voice, making Holly hastily stow her wand out of sight.

"Mr. Collins," she said in a slightly crazed tone. "You are driving me to the end of my wits. How do you manage to get around every single thing I do?"

He looked at her, slightly amused, though his eyes stayed rock hard. "Magic."

Madam Pomfrey threw up her hands in frustration, and Holly saw, to her relief, that Rose once more had fingers, though she was glaring back at Holly in a way that promised imminent humiliation.

"It is my job at the moment to annoy, Madam Pomfrey," Chris answered back, sarcasm dripping off every word. "I got sent here in the middle of another war, not that I'm complaining about the timing, and will no doubt be a non-participant in this as my punishment for letting slip I am not, in fact, over 20. So yes, Madam Pomfrey, I will be spending my efforts continuously confounding your every activity."

Madam Pomfrey opened her mouth to say something, hands on her hips, but the door opened once more and Remus Lupin walked in. "Holly, James and Lily are looking for you. What happened?"

Holly blushed, and Rose spoke. "Holly chopped off my fingers, Uncle Remus."

Remus's eyes widened and he looked at Holly, who looked indignantly at her younger sister. "I didn't chop off your fingers, Rose, I simply did a Separation Spell, one that you got in the way of. It's not like you are forever scarred or anything."

Rose stuck out her tongue at this, making Harry chuckle at the two siblings' antics.

Remus looked at him, his eyes narrowed. No doubt the werewolf had been aware that Harry was there, but he had been mildly distracted by the two girls. The two of them stared at each other, Remus radiating distrust and suspicion, while Harry kept his emotions tightly in check. He couldn't let Remus have any clue he knew him . . .

Remus bared his teeth a little in a wolfish manner when Harry refused to break eye contact first. They were interrupted when Holly, not noticing Harry and Remus's silent conversation of sorts, took offense at Harry's chuckling.

"What are you so amused about? Chris Collins, right?" She asked, sounding forceful and demanding. Harry looked at her, not impressed.

"Sibling rivalry. It has never failed to amuse me. You remind me of quite a few people I've met."

Only Remus and Madam Pomfrey could guess at the literal meaning at what he said, as Holly and Rose had no idea who this stranger was.

"That doesn't mean you have to laugh, listening in on private bickering. That's very rude, you know."

Harry mentally grinned: a verbal sparring match. Though nothing on the level of his and Snape's, this could be interesting.

"Of course. Who am I to be sitting here innocently," here Madam Pomfrey snorted, "in the Hospital Wing? How dare I not perform a Deafening Spell on myself to block out your rather loud argument when I don't have a wand. How completely silly of me. I hope I can be forgiven."

Holly couldn't think of a comeback, and Harry looked at her impassively, though there was a slight air of amusement about him.

"What are you doing here anyway? You're not a student!" Holly demanded, trying to cover her blank moment. "I've never even seen you before."

"Right back at you. Speaking of who-are-you's and why-are-you-here's, who are you?"

Holly smirked at him. She had an edge over him, as his curiosity was noticeable. She lifted her head haughtily in his direction. "It is not any concern of yours. However, my name is Holly Potter and this is Rose."

Harry choked. 'What?' his thoughts whirled around madly. He had never even considered the possibility that he could have brothers or sisters. Just the thought of his parents and Sirius alive was hard enough to comprehend but this— 'I made the right decision,' Harry thought wryly to himself. 'I have no right to put any of them in danger by revealing who I am, especially now.'

He quickly covered his slip in concentration, but not before Remus noticed. Quickly adding Chris Collin's reaction to his memory, Remus decided to act normally but definitely wouldn't trust him. When the werewolf came back to the present he was alarmed to see Holly and Rose warming up to him. He watched Rose march up to him.

"Why are you in the Hospital Wing? Did Holly get you, too? You look frightful," the nine- or so year-old girl asked Harry, who raised one eyebrow in astonishment of her forwardness. Holly pulled Rose back. "You just don't go around people saying they look frightful," a side-glance at Chris told her that he was amused, not angry, "even if they are."

Harry sneered amiably at Holly, and then answered Rose's questions. "Oh, it's nothing. I just picked a fight with someone I probably shouldn't have. As you can probably tell, I lost." Rose giggled a little, and he gave her a small smile. "You're coming to Hogwarts this year, right?"

She shook her head, like Harry had expected. "In two years," she responded in a light voice that reminded him somewhat of his mother's, though he wouldn't have recognized it if he didn't already know.

"Well, how about I share with you a couple of pranks I learned that you can set on Holly? I daresay your dad would approve."

She giggled again, and he saw Holly glare at him out of his peripheral vision.

Remus suddenly stood, surveying Harry coldly. "Come on, Rose, Holly, let's go find your parents."

"Okay, Uncle Remus," they replied, and Harry winked at Rose, and then smirked at Holly. She pouted back, and then quickly shook a fist at him. Remus followed them out, watching Harry carefully.

'They trust too easily,' Harry thought a little sadly. He knew that he wasn't dangerous to the two of them, but in a time of war, they were far too open.

He ignored his misgivings about that at the time-being and focused on the issue forefront in his mind. He had two sisters! Now that he knew, it was slightly obvious. Holly had their mum's thick red hair, though Holly's was wavy, and she had teal eyes that still had that quality of showing all emotions. Rose had straight black hair and James's brown eyes, though the face shape was almost exactly that of Lily's.

He was relieved that his siblings didn't look remotely like him. Hopefully he didn't have a brother as well, one that had shaggy black hair and green eyes. That could lead to suspicion.

Harry had to admit to himself that it was tempting to tell them what his real identity was. To possibly fit into that family, to constantly joke with Holly, to see his parents everyday and call them as such in public. But he knew it would never happen. Occasionally he liked to drop his millenarian, no-emotion act he had picked up from Snape,

but that was who he was. He couldn't be restricted to a family. This war would need him, and he needed to find his way back home. It shocked him to notice that his subconscious mind had already made that very same decision, noticeable by him calling his parents 'James' and 'Lily.'

His thoughts were interrupted by Madam Pomfrey walking in. He had noticed her leave after Remus walked in. What did he do now?

"Well, Mr. Collins, I 'm afraid that I'll have to re-break that leg of yours to heal it straight. It grew together at a remarkable rate, but if left alone too long, you will have a very oddly shaped limb."

He couldn't keep out a picture of himself walking down the hallways of Hogwarts like a pirate - clunking on a peg leg and having a patch over one eye when his eye-correction spell wore off. He could just see it now - 'Argh me harg, Voldemort! Walk down me plank to Davy Jone's locker!'

Voldemort lifted a 17th century sword, and the two started fencing, with Ron in the background singing, 'Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum.' Hermione, with her hair in a red and white striped bandana, hit Ron lightly.

'No alcohol, Ronald, you're a Prefect!'

Feeling slightly confused, Harry wondered what potion he had been given to make his mind come up with that picture. Reprimanding his foolish thoughts so they would leave him alone, he turned back to the real world.

"The bad news is that I can't use magic to numb your leg when I re-break it, it would null the healing spell. However, once it is healed, you are finally allowed to leave the Hospital. It's up to you."

Harry looked at her, one eyebrow slightly raised. Like he would consider staying here? "That sounds good to me, Madam Pomfrey."

Madam Pomfrey snorted. "I assumed as much. Prepare yourself. This may hurt a bit."

Harry grabbed on to the railing of the bed as she muttered the spell. Pain shot up his nerves straight to his brain but he didn't make a sound. He just watched Madam Pomfrey, ignoring the throbbing of his leg. He looked down at his leg and saw that it was at a crooked angle, so unnatural that it looked grotesque.

The Medi-witch immediately performed the Healing Spell, and Harry sighed silently with relief as his leg was now completely healed, feeling better than it had in over a month.

Sneaking a longing glance toward the door, he turned to Madam Pomfrey. "Can I leave?"

"Hold your hippogriffs, Mr. Collins." She performed some sort of charm on him to make sure he had no other injuries. "Well, it seems like you are good to go."

She smirked as he immediately hopped off the hospital bed he was. "You are a mystery, Mr. Collins. You survive being held prisoner by You-Know-Who for a month but can't survive being in here for a couple days. At least I now know what your deepest fear is," Madam Pomfrey said dryly. "My hospital."

He gave her a small smile as he walked out of the Wing, but felt strangely unsettled by her comment. 'Not by a long shot, Madam Pomfrey, he thought. 'Not by a long shot.'

Remus walked down the hallway towards James' and Lily's quarters, Holly and Rose following behind. He was worried about this new stranger that no one knew anything about. He had noticed a strong aura of dark magic around Collins, courtesy of his werewolf abilities. Remus wasn't sure if this darkness was actually from the teen or a result of being held by Voldemort for as long as he had. Basing off what he heard that first night of interrogation, it was probably the former. Remus's hackles rose as he remembered Collins' rather hostile reactions to the Potter adults and Sirius being named, and mentally growled.

Albus seemed to trust him moderately, but the werewolf had many doubts and resolved to warn Lily and James, and keep Holly and Rose as far as possible from him.

His thoughts stopped when he realized that they were at the teachers' quarters. Holly reached up to turn the hands on a picture of a clock, and the doorway to the Hogwarts Potter residence appeared. The older girl winced as a sudden cacophony of noise swelled around her.

"Holly Marie and Rose Ann Potter! Where have you been? When you asked permission to stay in the library all day, Holly, I didn't know you were going to go exploring with your sister! You better give a good explanation right now or else—"

"I think they get your point Lily," James said as he walked from the bedroom to the small group. Lily whirled around to face him with a look oddly reminiscent of Minerva McGonagall, making James squirm and face his two daughters. "Yes, well, as you mother was saying, do you two have a good reason for disappearing like that? You know times are dangerous, even in Hogwarts."

Rose looked toward Holly, who sighed. Apparently this was another example of how the oldest child becomes the first sacrifice.

"Well, I was practicing some of the OWLs charms like you suggested Mum," here Lily looked slightly mollified and Holly mentally cheered for that small point, "and Rose accidentally put her hand in the path of my Separation Spell. It was nothing serious," Holly hastily added as her mum turned white, and Rose, realizing that the two of them might be in for it soon, raised her hand to show that it looked perfectly normal. "Madam Pomfrey fixed it in a jiffy, and that's where we were when Uncle Remus found us."

Lily looked at them shrewdly for a second, and then nodded. "Alright you two. Make sure it doesn't happen again, okay?" The two girls nodded contritely and rushed down a hallway to their rooms.

James turned to greet Remus when he realized that there was an expression of absolute seriousness on his face.

“What’s wrong Moony? Did anything else happen?” Remus looked down the hallway Rose and Holly had disappeared to before answering.

“You two have met Collins, right?” Lily and James nodded, looking at each other in confusion.

“Do you believe him? Do you think he can be trusted?”

James sat down on a nearby chair as he contemplated this question. Lily and Remus joined him. “Well, from what I’ve seen, I don’t trust him because I don’t know anything about him — well, except not to sneak up on him.” He grinned ruefully at the memory as Lily muttered, “Idiot,” under her breath. “I have no reason not to trust him though, but during war I guess that means I don’t trust him.”

Lily nodded her head at her husband’s statement. “I can’t really judge him yet because I have only met him once, when he was escaping from the Hospital Wing. He seemed sort of out of place here. He knows his way around the castle, yes, and seems to oddly recognize everyone, but I think that a lot of things are different here than where he is from. He recognized me, and acted extremely shocked, but he said I just reminded him of someone he knew from his world.”

Remus considered both of their answers then spoke slowly, trying to say what he meant without being too rash.

“I think you should try to keep Holly and Rose away from him.” At Lily’s and James’ expectant looks he continued on. “He seemed stunned when he realized that they were Potters. Along with the fact that he seemed to know you, Lily, and lashed out when Severus spoke about Sirius, I think that he was possibly enemies with you back in his world. You would obviously be an Auror in his world, James, so maybe you arrested him or fought with him.”

“Does your opinion also have to do with whatever you found out about him that first night?” Lily asked keenly, making Remus nod.

“Yes, when he was interrogated he spoke almost casually of using Dark spells. In some cases they have to be used, even for the Light, but I don’t think that was the case, because he said he used the Cruciatus Curse. Even now he has an aura of Dark Magic around him, and I don’t think he is safe.”

Lily and James sat pale-faced, thinking about what the werewolf had told them.

“It doesn’t seem logical though,” Lily said. “If he was a Dark Wizard, Albus wouldn’t be so trusting would he? Especially since we know nothing about him.”

“Either way, I don’t think you should let Holly or Rose near him, Lily. It’s safer that way.”

James and Lily looked at each, and then nodded.

Sunlight streamed out of windows as Harry walked by, drinking in the sight of the castle. Some of the pictures were different, such as a nearby portrait of Vindelean the Vanquisher, which Harry had never seen before. He stood in front of the portrait and observed the painted scene.

He remembered Hermione drilling historic people into Ron’s and his brain, and Harry remembered Vindelean as the one who had defeated the last of the dragon riders, providing the land with peace for 300 years. It was rumored that Rowena Ravenclaw was a descendent of his, but Harry refused to create his own opinion about wizard genealogy, it usually didn’t include good news, so he left it alone.

Harry suddenly froze and chuckled wryly when he realized what he was doing. Released from the hospital wing, in an alternate reality, and here he was thinking about ancient historical paintings. Shaking his head, he continued to walk down the hallway, ignoring any paintings he saw. It was summer here, so he didn’t have to worry about getting caught by multitudes of curious not-quite strangers, but

he didn't feel comfortable skulking down hallways without his Invisibility Cloak.

He wished even more for his Cloak when he turned the corner and saw Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat that seemed to possess a strange connection to the caretaker that made him appear if she ever caught someone misbehaving. Not quite liking the steady gaze of the cat's narrowed eyes, he slowly walked backwards, keeping eye contact with Mrs. Norris and raising his hands in an innocent gesture.

Apparently the feline wasn't appeased because she let out a yowl and rushed at him, making him give up his slow retreat as he bolted back the way he had come.

Harry ran up a moving staircase, taking the steps two at a time, and reaching the upper landing. The stairs continued rotating so the cat couldn't reach the landing he was currently on. He laughed as Mrs. Norris prowled angrily a floor below, mewing loudly and bemoaning the fact that she couldn't catch him.

"Ha ha, demon cat," he muttered, glaring at her still pacing form. He didn't forget all those times that she had gotten him caught by Filch, not least the time before the Second Task when he became certain that cats could see through Invisibility Cloaks. Mrs. Norris looked straight up at Harry and hissed, making Harry mock hiss back.

He heard a light, firm gait behind him and searched his memory banks to see who the footsteps belonged to, as he had practiced during his sixth year. The knowledge had become infinitely valuable when sneaking around after hours: it was Minerva McGonagall, the Transfiguration professor.

"I see you have met Mr. Filch's cat," the Deputy Headmistress said behind him. He turned to look at her, making sure his face was expressionless and his Occlumency shields in place. She seemed to be slightly amused by his interaction with Mrs. Norris, and Harry wondered if she had seen the cat chasing him.

"Oh, yes Professor McGonagall. Mrs. Norris and I go way back," he said, a mock growl coloring his voice.

The strict teacher's mouth twitched for a second. "I'm sure you have Mr. Collins, if you are half the troublemaker you seem to be."

"Me, a troublemaker? No, I never was one for pranks or anything. She usually caught me roaming the castle at night." McGonagall glared sternly back, and he elaborated, keeping a light, expressionless look on his face. "I may have deserved it a little bit after I advised Peeves to start closing her up into the suits of armor, and tossing her into the lake. There was also this one time when she might have come face to face with a rather large dog through my ministrations, but nothing too horrible."

"Well, Mr. Collins, I will hope that you don't do that to every cat you meet in Hogwarts," she returned watching him with a slightly humorous expression.

Harry chuckled. "Of course not, Professor, especially not one that controls my grade."

Their conversation was interrupted when the moving staircase turned back to its original position and Mrs. Norris came scurrying up the stairs, yellow eyes focused on Harry as she yowled in triumph. He cursed under his breath, making Professor McGonagall frown at him disapprovingly, but he barely acknowledged her stern look before he started sprinting down the hallway. The Transfiguration Professor watched in amusement as the cat picked up speed and raced after the retreating form of Collins, before turning back to her office.

The passing pictures as Harry ran away from the cat, using a small bit of magic to speed up. Given, it usually wasn't really necessary to run away from Mrs. Norris, but he didn't have a wand, and he didn't want to take the chance of anyone seeing him use wandless magic. He sped around a corner and saw Mad-Eye Moody watching him with interest. Ignoring the Auror, Harry turned, and standing in front of a candle, made his hands form a shadow puppet of a dog, growling deep in his throat.

Immediately he heard a demon-like caterwaul, and, peeking back around the corner, saw Mrs. Norris scrambling back down the hallway away from him.

Sighing in relief, Harry leaned up against the corridor wall, panting slightly and remembering that Moody was watching him.

He looked up to see Moody cackling at him.

“Do you always make shadow puppets to chase away your enemies, Collins?” he asked, his blue eye dancing madly in its socket, no doubt laughing at Harry as well.

Harry glared at Moody and stood up from his position against the wall. “Only when I don’t have my wand,” he responded icily, and then broke into a grin. “Actually I found out in my sixth year that Mrs. Norris was mortally afraid of dogs when she bumped into Hagrid’s dog, Fang.”

Moody chuckled, nodding his head in agreement, and then narrowed both of his eyes suddenly at him. “So, laddie, you expect us to believe that you’re from another universe and all that?”

Harry watched the Auror, knowing what he was getting at. “Yes. I think Professor Dumbledore understands the details of it much better than I ever could. I wasn’t sure at first either, but from what I’ve seen it makes sense.”

“Oh, and what’s that? You need to prove it, lad. There’s no way anyone here can trust you until we know what side you’re on.” Moody looked at him challengingly, and Harry became slightly nervous. He was almost invincible to Legilimency, but the Moody in his world could always tell when he lied. ‘Better keep it vague, Potter,’ he thought to himself.

“One: the history is different here. Voldemort was never temporarily defeated, people here don’t recognize me, which would be odd in any other setting, and,” he paused momentarily, about to say that certain people were still alive here, “and the teachers are different. Two: to prove I’m on your side, Fawkes has no problem with me, and I did

stop those Dementors. If I was a Death Eater, I would have done nothing, since they wouldn't harm a follower of Voldemort. Convinced?"

Moody was looking at him, weighing his options.

"Show me your left arm."

Harry blanched. He didn't want that particular scar known to everyone. Moody, who had seen him turn pale, pulled out his wand.

"Now," Mad-Eye growled.

"Dumbledore, Snape, and Lupin all know that I do not have the Dark Mark. I see no need to prove it to anyone else. However, I will go with you when you ask one of those three."

"Collins, I—"

Mad-Eye Moody's brogue was caught off by a dangerously silky voice, and they both turned to see Snape walking down the hallway towards them.

"Well, well, well, enjoying antagonizing Mr. Collins, Moody?" The potions Professor asked, and Harry felt a small moment of relief. Snape might be on his side. Then Harry froze. What did Snape want from him? Slytherins don't help someone for nothing, as he had discovered many times.

"Can you verify that he doesn't have the Dark Mark, Snape?" Moody asked, glaring at Harry, who kept his eyes on Snape.

"Yes, I can Moody. He doesn't. Now, if you'll excuse us, I have to have a word with Mr. Collins here."

Moody stalked off, muttering about Slytherins and secretive strangers.

Harry turned to Snape. "Thanks."

Snape sneered back at him, as they both started to walk in the opposite direction from Moody. "I assumed that if you bumped into Moody that this would happen. It would not be advantageous for the whole world to know that you have been branded, in your own form, by the Dark Lord."

Harry nodded, seeing the Slytherin logic behind it. "I want to apologize for yesterday. I shouldn't have reacted that way, but I was still slightly on edge, and what you said brought back a few memories." Memories, indeed. Flickers of memory from fourth and fifth year swirled in his mind, but he hastily shoved them out to pay attention to Snape.

Snape stopped, looking at him, his face impassive. "I accept. I guess you are not completely a reckless Gryffindor after all."

Harry snorted, amused, and Snape looked at him questioningly. Harry cursed himself at his slip, then told the tale, knowing that Snape would be suspicious if he didn't. "The Sorting Hat always wanted to place me in Slytherin."

Snape continued to look at Harry, eyes demanding information. "Before that, I had met Draco Malfoy," Snape tsked his tongue in soft annoyance, and, grinning slightly, Harry continued, "and he started going on and on about Quidditch, Mudbloods, his father, a lot about his father, and Slytherin. Since I was Muggleborn, I didn't know what any of that was, but I knew by his sneer that he was a rich git. Then, I met Ron Weasley on the train, and he told me about all the houses. He looked horrified at the idea of being in Slytherin, so being young and impressionable, I didn't want to either. So I argued for the Hat for a couple minutes before it put me in Slytherin."

Snape looked at him, faintly amused. "You argued with the Sorting Hat?"

"Yes, and good thing, too, because Malfoy still hates me to this day," Harry started on a completely different vein. He couldn't tell too much about himself. "So, are you the Head of Slytherin House here?"

“Yes,” Snape responded. They were just passing by the library, and Harry saw the sun start to turn red.

“Are you still horrible to any students not in Slytherin?”

Snape began to nod, before turning to him, a glint in his eye. “Are you sure you could have been in Slytherin? You are far too blunt.”

Harry grinned. “I got an answer, didn’t I?” Snape glared at him, one of the kill-the-first-year types, and Harry laughed. “I’ve been immune to that glare for years. Sometimes, but not often, being direct will get your answer.”

The two continued walking in silence, walking forward in a down slope path Harry rarely enjoyed using. He watched as the merrily lit torches became fewer and far between, and the walls were bare of painting or decoration.

“Err, why are we going to the dungeons? Are you about to kill me when there aren’t any witnesses? Because I can assure you that there are quite a few people ahead of you in line.”

Snape looked back at him, one eyebrow raised at Harry’s sarcasm. “As much as that would please me, and undoubtedly Moody, no.” They both turned a corner and Harry barely contained a gasp. There was a statue of Salazar Slytherin, exactly the same as the one in the Chamber of Secrets, if only extremely smaller in size. It was secured into part of the wall, looking as if had been directly cut from the same stone as the walls.

“What is that?” Harry asked, making his voice seem innocently curious. He certainly didn’t remember that being at the Hogwarts of his world, and knew that it couldn’t be anything good.

“Shouldn’t you know?” Snape asked, raising an eyebrow when Harry shook his head.

“This is too close to the Slytherin common room. I didn’t typically explore down here, seeing as how this area is taboo for lone

Gryffindors. Not to mention that you weren't overly fond of me, and gave me detention at any opportunity."

"Ah, so you were a Gryffindor," Snape said, making Harry mentally curse yet again, 'Way to go, Potter.' "What did you ever do so that I disliked you so much?"

"I was in Gryffindor, not to mention friends with several people you disliked. So, what is that?" Harry asked again, motioning toward the statue hoping to distract him, then groaned as Snape seemed to get into professor mode.

"During the time of the founders, there were many dark wizards, none of whom were properly trained. Therefore, Slytherin, the most suspicious of the four founders, thought that soon spies would try to get into Hogwarts to destroy the stronghold and learn powerful magic. Salazar Slytherin created this statue for the purpose of making sure his students were completely loyal to Hogwarts. If they put their hand on the statue and were, in fact, a spy, their hand would be burned off."

Harry winced. "Let me guess, there's a running bet to see if my hand gets burned off."

Snape smirked at him. "As a matter of fact, I am the only one who knows about the statue, besides Dumbledore. Because of the war, it is necessary to make sure that you are not a spy. Be warned though: you have to be loyal to Hogwarts, not to the Dark Lord, not to the Ministry, not even to Dumbledore. Just Hogwarts."

Harry sighed. He knew that something like this was coming, though it hurt that people he knew but didn't know didn't trust him at all. Harry realized that he was being ridiculous, but it still hurt. He wasn't loyal to Voldemort or the Ministry at all, and wasn't even completely loyal to Albus Dumbledore. Hogwarts, however . . . he remembered always thinking of Hogwarts as home, even when Umbridge controlled it, and even after Dumbledore seemed suspicious of Harry's learning of Dark Arts. Harry knew he was completely loyal to Hogwarts.

Moving swiftly, before he could have second thoughts, Harry walked forward and put his hand on the statue. It turned green ('what a shock' Harry thought sarcastically at the stereotypical color) and shuddered before returning to normal. Closing his eyes, Harry took his hand off the statue. He hesitantly cracked one eye open and sighed with relief when nothing happened.

Snape stood there with his arms crossed, watching the whole scene without emotion. He nodded in acceptance of the statue's verdict, and then turned to face Harry.

"What can you bring to this war, Collins?" Snape asked him directly. "What talents do you have that made you such a high target?"

Harry scowled at Snape's question. He wondered if Dumbledore had put him up to it. Harry knew that he couldn't answer those questions truthfully, and he was reluctant to give away anything at all.

"Why is it important? Will Dumbledore even let me fight at all? If he is anything like the meddling old coot he was in my world, he won't," Harry responded, deciding to get some answers to one of his main concerns.

Instead of demanding answers, as Harry half thought he might, Snape snorted. "He will no doubt try to stop you, which is why you need to prove that you can fight. Whether the Headmaster will admit it or not, the Order, which you already seem to know about, needs more fighters, and you might be needed, just now an adult though you are."

Harry nodded absentmindedly at that. Harry would eventually have to show his magical prowess sometime, and he knew that he needed to fight.

"I can produce a fairly strong Patronus, can manipulate basic spells to make them stronger, and won a dueling tournament at my school, even against the teachers, barring Dumbledore." Harry chuckled at the memory of sending Snape head over heels out the Great Hall windows and into the lake. "Besides that, I can sneak around better than almost anyone, and," here he winced slightly, but it needed to be

said, "I have a fair knowledge of Dark Arts, particularly their counter curses. As to why I fight, my reasons are my own."

Snape looked at him appraisingly, and Harry mentally dared him to challenge his statement. However, Snape just smirked.

"I don't doubt your ability to sneak around," he said, and Harry sneered at him. "However, you're going to get into a sticky situation with Moody with your claims about dueling and Dark Arts."

Harry winced, making Snape's smirk grow. "Yeah, I have a feeling Moody isn't very fond of me at the moment."

The two of them were back into the Entrance Hall by this time, and curiosity made Harry reckless enough to chance being labeled insane.

Harry looked at Snape, who was about to head off in the direction of Dumbledore's office. "Do you know what happened to the Peter Pettigrew of this world?"

Snape seemed surprised at the question. "He's a member of the Order. Why?"

Harry kept his boiling anger at bay, and answered as emotionlessly as he could. "No reason." However, Harry couldn't stop himself from stalking off with anger at the thought of the would-be cause of his parents' death.

He didn't notice Snape watching him leave with a calculating look on his face.

Snape walked slowly down the path towards Dumbledore's office, pondering the mystery that was Chris Collins. Everything about the boy struck him as odd, especially his magical skills and his apparent hatred of Pettigrew.

Not that Snape blamed Collins for that. It was hard not to dislike the whining, cowardly man that, surprisingly enough, Lupin, Potter, and Black were still friends with. Snape was pretty much alone in his disdain for all things Marauder, though, except for Minerva, who

seemed to quickly grow irritated with their stunts. Speaking of things Marauder, James Potter bounced up behind him.

“Hello, Snape! What are you doing outside the dungeons? It is daytime you know!”

Snape sneered shortly at the idiocy that was Potter. ‘Collins, if you don’t like Potter either, you just added another check in my book,’ he thought before responding.

“As surprising as the revelation that you can somewhat use your brain is, Potter, some people actually have work to do. So, if your amazing realization about the Sun did not drain all your mental focus, please go away.”

To his surprise, James Potter stepped in front of him, a look of complete seriousness on his face. “Snape, I saw you talking to Collins. Is he dangerous?”

Severus considered sneering, answering sarcastically and walking away, but suddenly he realized that James was not asking this out of curiosity. He was concerned, probably for Lily and his children. The thought that James Potter could actually be responsible made him answer.

“Collins is no doubt dangerous, but not to us. He’s loyal to Hogwarts and hates the Dark Lord, if nothing else. He does, however, seem to have some knowledge of the Dark Arts. Why?”

James sighed, and suddenly seemed his age rather than someone still eighteen. “I’m worried about him being in Hogwarts when Lily and I can’t watch the girls completely. Don’t mock that, Snape.”

Severus sneered. “I have no urge to do so. What made you so suspicious of him anyway?”

“One: he flipped me against a wall when I snuck up on him, an—”

Severus smirked. This was rich. “Potter, you honestly snuck up on someone who had just spent a month captured by the Dark Lord and

you didn't suspect him to be jumpy? That's no reason to be suspicious, you were just an idiot!"

James shook his head forlornly. "So I've been told many times. Anyway, Remus said that he sensed a Dark Aura on him, one that was not caused just by being subjected to Dark Spells. At the risk of sounding Slytherin, it is better to be suspicious and right than to receive someone with open arms and be wrong."

Severus raised an eyebrow at that. "I'm mildly impressed Potter, though I assume Lily originally thought of that. However, there is no reason to be suspicious of him, just don't sneak up on him."

Severus side-stepped James, but remembered something and said one last thing. "I suggest you make sure he doesn't cross paths with Pettigrew. I'd hate to see the carnage."

James whipped around to eye Severus. "What does that mean? I've already heard cryptic warnings that he doesn't like Sirius, me or Lily, and now Peter? What did he say?"

"He asked what this world's Peter Pettigrew was doing, and when I told him Pettigrew was an Order member there was murder in his eyes," Severus answered, also wondering what had happened in Collins' world to make him hate most of the Marauder's. It's not as if he was old enough to have been subjected to their pranking.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," Severus said, deciding to abandon his attempt of speaking to the Headmaster, "I have more important things to do than play guessing games. I suggest simply asking Collins, if you're so curious."

Severus walked off, noting to his great amusement that James Potter looked as if he were considering doing just that.

Chapter 5: Let the Games Begin

Harry grumbled as a sudden beam of light flashed across his face, alerting him to the fact that it was now morning. Rolling over, he reached for his glasses only to remember too late that they weren't there, making him gasp in surprise as he leaned too far over and fell off the bed he was on.

He heard a small snort of amusement to his left and was instantly on his feet facing whatever unknown person was in the room, a small blade (courtesy of the Room of Requirement) in his hand.

To Harry's bemusement, he saw a house-elf squeaking in fright at his sudden movement and weapon. He felt guilty at terrifying the elf, as he knew how high-strung they were, and knelt down to be the same height as it.

"I'm sorry," he said seriously. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Can I help you with anything?"

The house-elf looked back at him with watery amber eyes with an expression of confusion on her face.

"Why is Master apologizing to Tinny? Tinny apologizes for frightening sir!"

Harry sighed. Hermione had grown on him and now he disliked all protocol of the house-elves enslavement. He wasn't as pushy as Hermione because he understood that cleaning was part of their culture and was like flying to him, but Harry didn't like the fact that they were so looked down on.

"Tinny, you have no reason to apologize to me. It's my fault I'm so jumpy, not yours." Knowing that he was just confusing the house-elf more if anything, Harry decided to let it pass. "Why are you here?"

"Tinny is here to bring sir to Master Dumbledore! He says it's most urgent, sir!"

Harry nodded to Tinny. "Thank you, but I think I can find his office on my own. Thanks, Tinny." The house-elf looked at him in bewilderment because of the way he acted towards her, but vanished with a loud crack none the less.

Harry sighed, then stood up and stretched. It was amazing how well he situated to being in an alternate dimension. Given, maybe it wasn't the best diplomatic effort – he winced remembering throwing both James Potter and Severus Snape against a wall at some point – but on the whole, he hadn't panicked yet.

Speaking of panic, he thought as he walked out of the Room of Requirement, where he had found himself late last night after talking to Severus, he wondered what the people in his world were doing. Voldemort was most likely in a towering rage, and Harry was grateful that he was now somehow connected to this world's Voldemort, instead of the other one. He automatically dumped the questions as to how that happened out of his mind. He probably wouldn't figure it out anyway without asking some very suspicious questions, and there were more important things to worry about.

Harry frowned as he wondered what the Order was doing right now. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were probably freaking out, not to mention Mrs. Weasley, and the other members were probably not much better, going haywire since theoretically he was the only one who could kill Tom Riddle.

Harry unconsciously paused in his walking and leaned against a corridor wall, lost in his thoughts. He hoped Severus didn't get captured or punished for his escape. The Order needed their spy, especially until Harry could get back, if he could get back. Harry knew he would give almost anything to go back to the world that he knew, the people here notwithstanding. He missed Ginny, and Ron and Hermione, and countless others.

Realizing he was standing still, Harry started walking again, shaking off his depressing thoughts. 'Dumbledore said that to travel through universes one had to accidentally break the rules of magic,' he told himself sternly. 'Pondering what ifs will not help.'

Refusing to think anymore until he reached the Headmaster's office, Harry tread up to the familiar gargoyle statue that blocked the threshold to Dumbledore's office, then paused. Harry felt his small amount of dignity disappear as he stood idiotically in front of the silent statue.

"Lemon drops?" He asked hesitantly. The gargoyle didn't even blink.

"Erm – Cockroach Cluster?" Still no movement.

"Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans? He might like them here . . . apparently not."

Harry leaned up against the opposite wall and glared at the gargoyle with no effect.

"Stupid, ugly statue," he muttered at it. "You never open until completely succeeding in making me look like an idiot. No doubt that is exactly what Dumbledore has in mind when he sets up the password. I've met Slytherins less annoying than you — Chocolate Frog?" He offered hopefully, quickly getting off his tangent in hopes of shocking the gargoyle, but to no avail.

Harry's muttering subsided as he imagined something in his head. He could just see Dumbledore planting a magical camera somewhere around here, catching even the most formidable of people making absolute fools of themselves. He wondered if that was what professors did at staff meetings: have an uproarious party with crisps and butterbeer, listening to Wizarding Wireless Networks they had confiscated from students, and watching students poke and guess their way into common rooms. Harry could even see Snape heading a gambling station, where teachers put their money on how long it would take Neville to remember the password, complete with Dumbledore cackling insanely and bidding off his lemon drops.

Blinking, Harry wandered where that came from. 'Apparently,' he thought, 'traveling across dimensions made me slightly insane.'

He was about to give up and go to the library when he saw Moody heading towards him. Cursing his luck, he stood there as the old Auror clunked up to him.

“What are you doing, Collins? Trying to sneak into Dumbledore’s office?”

“Of course, Moody. I was hired as an assassin by Voldemort to kill off Dumbledore, and he didn’t even bother to tell me the password,” he said sarcastically, realizing too late that that probably wasn’t the best diplomatic effort.

Harry sighed. “Can you just tell me the password? Dumbledore sent a house-elf to bring me to his office, and I don’t want the house-elf feeling guilty because I didn’t show up. I already half-scared her to death.”

“Scaring house-elves, Collins? What on Earth did you do to it?” Moody asked chuckling.

“Her,” he corrected automatically, yet another house-elf related habit he had picked up from Hermione. “She woke me up and I nearly attacked before realizing that she was a house-elf.”

Moody outright laughed at that.

“Paranoid, are we?” He cackled, and Harry was about to say a very unrefined remark about irony when the gargoyle shifted and Dumbledore stepped out.

“Ah, Mr. Collins, I was just about to come find you. I assume that you found your way around here easily enough,” the headmaster asked, his eyes twinkling at Harry’s disgruntled glare at the gargoyle.

“Stupid hunk of rock,” he muttered threateningly at it, and then turned to Dumbledore. “No problems. Moody just thought I was coming to assassinate you and was laughing at me for scaring a house-elf.”

“Really, now?” Albus said, looking at Moody through his half-moon glasses. “Well, no need to worry, then. Now, Mr. Collins, if I could speak to you in my office please,” Dumbledore said leading the way up the spiral staircase.

Harry crept behind Dumbledore in an over-emphasized vampire-like way while glaring mockingly at Moody before walking normally up the stairs. As the gargoyle swung shut, Harry heard a few well-chosen words behind him that sounded remarkably like what he had been about to say himself.

As the two wizards reached Dumbledore’s inner office, Harry said in a dry tone, “I don’t think Moody is overly fond of me.”

“No,” Albus said, his blue eyes twinkling in mirth, “I wouldn’t say he is.”

“Now,” Dumbledore continued as he sat behind his desk, gesturing for Harry to also sit. “I realize that there is some information about this world that you can not find in the library that you may need to know, and I admit to being slightly curious about your dimension. (‘Slightly?’ Harry mentally exclaimed. ‘Slightly? Yeah, and Voldemort throws the occasion temper tantrum.’) So, if you would like to reenter the agreement from your first night here...”

Harry nodded at the agreement, knowing that it could be much worse, and Dumbledore motioned for him to ask first.

“Who are the soon-to-be seventh year Gryffindors?” Harry asked, knowing that he was pretty much giving away his House identity, but decided that knowing his friends were alive was much more important.

“Let’s see,” Dumbledore said, and listed them off on his fingers.

“Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan, Ron Weasley, Collin Creevey, Hermione Granger, Lavender Brown, Parvati Patil, and Rebecca Moon.”

Harry's eyes widened when he heard the gaps in the in the list. He knew that Harry Potter wouldn't be on there, but where was Neville? Harry desperately hoped that Neville was just in Hufflepuff, and tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach that didn't bode well. He barely acknowledged the fact that Collin Creevey was a year older and that he didn't know who Rebecca Moon was.

Closing his eyes, Harry heard Dumbledore ask, "Who are the Inner Circle Death Eaters in your world?"

Harry felt confused until he realized that the Death Eater would probably be the same here. "Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Avery, Rookwood, Karkaroff, Macnair, Snape, though he's a spy, Bellatrix Lestrangle, Rodolphus Lestrangle, and his brother, Rabastan Lestrangle." Harry left out the name of Peter Pettigrew. It would raise too many questions. "Antonin Dolohov, Rosier, Travers, Mulciber . . . Oh! Crouch's son!"

Dumbledore, who had been writing down the names on a scroll of parchment, jumped at the last. "Barty Crouch, Jr.? You are sure?"

Harry looked back on his memories from fourth year and nodded. "I don't know if he is here, but he definitely was a Death Eater in my world."

Albus looked at him shrewdly, wondering if he could get any extra information. "You've met him before, have you?"

"I am not going to get into that, Professor." Once Dumbledore had nodded, Harry asked the question that he half-way didn't want to know the answer for. Taking a deep breath, he asked, "What happened to Neville Longbottom?"

At once, Dumbledore's eyes lost their twinkle and Harry felt the blood leave his face. 'No . . .'

"He is in a mental ward in St. Mungo's since being attacked with the Cruciatus Curse when Mrs. Longbottom would not tell the whereabouts of her husband, who is an Auror in the Order."

“When?” Harry asked tonelessly.

“November 1, 1981.”

Harry looked down at his hands, trying to keep his emotions under control. During the summer before sixth year, he and Neville and become fast friends, almost like brothers. To know that Neville existed yet in a way didn't exist here was unbelievable.

No wonder Voldemort was still alive, when both of the children mentioned in the Prophecy had been killed or incapacitated.

‘Why?’ Harry thought. It made no sense. Voldemort hadn't been defeated, there was no need to find where he was ... it was just more mindless destruction by the Death Eaters.

Harry, his face a stone cold mask, looked up and nodded at Dumbledore. The agreement was still on.

“How was Voldemort temporarily defeated in your world?”

Harry mentally cringed. The only way to answer this was to pull out all the stops and use his Slytherin ambiguities.

“I never actually found out if there was a specific spell involved. Everyone narrowed it down to ancient magic, some sort of sacrifice, but I didn't hear about it until I was eleven since I was raised in the Muggle world. I didn't even know who Voldemort was.”

Harry mentally cheered as Dumbledore seemed to accept that answer, and didn't seem suspicious at all.

Dumbledore noted the information mentally, having a feeling that the wizard in front of him was being perfectly honest, yet leaving out something very important.

“Who is the Minister here?” Harry wondered. If it was still Fudge, the Minister would be in for a nasty ride after meeting Harry. ‘Lazy, no good, sloppy, prejudiced little—’

He stopped his thoughts when Dumbledore responded, “Barty Crouch.”

“Really?” Harry said without thinking. “But—” He stopped to think about it. ‘Of course! If his son was never found out for torturing the Longbottoms, then he would never have fallen from grace. I wonder where Fudge is now?’

Dumbledore looked at him with amusement. “I’m guessing it is not so in your world. Who is Minister there?”

“Cornelius Fudge,” Harry growled, his tone saying all that was necessary about how he felt with that appointment.

To his surprise, Albus started chuckling, making Harry glare in his direction. “Yeah, yeah, go on, laugh, but I bet Crouch isn’t much better. Nearly Dark himself.”

Albus stopped chuckling, though his eyes were still twinkling. “Yes, well, I suppose rigid rules are better than incompetence.”

Harry looked at him, one eyebrow raised. “Oh? And what does Fudge do here that makes you know him so well?”

“He’s the Senior Undersecretary to Minister Crouch, though many question how he got that job.”

“I’d be happy with the appointment if I were you,” Harry warned, his eyes glittering. “The one in my world was Dolores Umbridge until Hermione Granger led her into the Forbidden Forest where she was attacked by centaurs.”

“Oh really?” Dumbledore said. The spirit of the information sharing was no longer serious, each moderately satisfied with the information they had discovered. “What did she ever do to deserve that?”

“Well, she had some how managed to become the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor— remember, Fudge was Minister— and she caught me sneaking into her office,” Harry said, and when Dumbledore looked at Harry curiously, he shook his head, still feeling a hefty amount of guilt for that night. “Long story. Anyway, Hermione came to my rescue, and said that there was a weapon against the Ministry in the Forbidden Forest. Umbridge, thinking that Hermione was serious followed us into the Forest where we were caught by the herd of centaurs.” Harry rolled his eyes at Umbridge’s stupidity. “She called the centaurs ‘half-breeds’ and creatures not equal in intelligence to humans. They kidnapped her, dragged her off to who knows where, and she was scared of centaurs ever since. The idiot.”

“You’ll be pleased to know that Madam Umbridge is the head of the International Diplomacy office, then.”

“What!” Harry exclaimed. “You mean that hag — I mean, err, she still works in the Ministry?”

“Unfortunately so, Mr. Collins. It seems that the bureaucrats are fairly similar in any universe. Why isn’t Barty Crouch Minister in your world?”

Harry felt a small chill in his stomach at that question. “He was murdered by his son,” he answered, no emotion coloring his voice, and he felt more than saw Dumbledore become serious.

“So,” Harry said, attempting to lighten the mood, “should I tell you who Voldemort is or do you want to attempt a couple guesses?”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled with the challenge. “I suppose you would be most upset if I asked you to simply tell me?”

“Of course Professor. Where is the fun in that?”

“Very well,” the old wizard sighed, though he looked as if he was going to enjoy figuring out the answer very much. “Do you have any hints?”

“Just that you’ll find figuring it out quite a word puzzle, Headmaster, one to make the Caped Crusader quite proud. Oh, and you do know him. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to find more people to antagonize.”

Dumbledore nodded absently, his eyes unfocused as he tried to figure out the now sought-after identity of Voldemort.

Harry had stepped out from behind the gargoyle before he realized that he was deathly hungry. Dumbledore hadn’t even offered him a lemon drop, a rare first. It had been about a month since he had had real food, and decided to bolt for the Great Hall, wondering if the house-elves were still serving food there. It couldn’t be that far after noon.

He found out that he was correct, though only Holly, Rose, Remus and Moody were currently in the Great Hall. It was only the close proximity to food that stopped him from walking in the other direction.

The Great Hall contained only a few smaller tables instead of the four large House tables, so, sighing, Harry walked quietly up to the inhabited table.

“Do you mind if I join you?” He asked politely. He could see a joint look in Moody and Remus’s eyes that they were going to refuse if possible, but Holly quickly pulled him into a seat.

“Sit and eat,” she commanded, looking and sounding for all the world like Mrs. Weasley. “We can get back to insulting each other later.”

Harry grinned at her, and helped himself to a piece of steak-and-kidney pie. Ignoring the conversation going between the two adults, he ate slowly but steadily, knowing not to eat too much so his stomach wouldn’t revolt.

“Hungry, are you?” Holly asked in an amused voice beside him as he ate the last bite on his plate.

“Of course,” he answered, setting down his fork, “it’s been at least a month since I last ate.”

Rose’s eyes widened at this, and Remus looked at him sternly, so Harry hastily tagged on an ending to that sentence. “Anything as good as Hogwarts food, I mean,” he finished, smiling at Rose. “Muggle frozen meals just aren’t as good.”

The nine-year-old didn’t seem to notice anything suspicious, but Holly narrowed her eyes at him. Knowing that she was about to start asking some very pointed questions, Harry hastily brought up a conversation starter.

“Not to be nosy, but who’s this Snicky I heard about? The one with better aim than you?” Holly instantly blushed and glared at Rose, who giggled.

“Snicky is my owl,” Rose answered, while Holly muttered “Annoying feather ball, hooting constantly,” under her breath.

“Now, now, Holly,” Harry said, grinning slightly at her expression, “it isn’t proper for a young lady to talk about herself in such a way.”

She instantly snapped in his direction, glaring while turning a few shades redder. When he seemed unfazed, she turned toward Rose and proceeded to ignore him. Rolling his eyes at her, Harry decided to focus on what the two adults were discussing.

“–stop banshees, now that they’re on his side,” Moody said in a frustrated tone.

“The only way is Silencing Charms, but those aren’t always effective,” Remus replied, looking serious.

“Blue,” Harry said absentmindedly, and everyone turned towards him.

“What?” Remus asked looking at him suspiciously.

“Banshees hate the color blue. They don’t usually attack Muggles, but no one knew why until it was noticed the Muggles usually wear blue jeans or jackets, but since wizards usually wear black, they aren’t protected. So, for example, if you blindfold banshees with blue fabric, they faint.”

There was utter silence at the table as the three old enough to understand digested the information. Rose just knew it had something to do with the war, but wasn’t aware of the seriousness.

“How did you find that out, Collins?” Moody asked, looking at him appraisingly.

“An Auror told me,” Harry replied, looking at Moody pointedly.

The look was lost on Holly and Rose, but Moody seemed to grasp what he meant.

“Oh really?” He asked in his harsh brogue. 'What other solutions had been found in his world that would be invaluable here?' thought Moody. “How would you suggest beating Dementors if you can’t cast the Patronus Charm?”

Harry thought about that one for a second. He personally had never encountered the problem, and he hadn’t heard of anyone surviving with their soul intact who hadn’t cast the Patronus or run away.

“Can you put a Cheering Charm on a Dementor?” He mused out loud, making Remus and Moody look at him like he was insane.

“How do you find all these strange, twisted solutions, Collins?” Moody asked, looked torn between amusement and deep thought. “I can’t say I’ve ever seen someone have the gall to send a charm other than Patronus at a Dementor.”

Remus looked at him shrewdly. “I don’t think that would quite work. Dementors are demons, so only a spell created specially for the purpose of dealing with them would work.”

Harry frowned in thought at that. "What if you put the Cheering Charm on yourself?"

"What good would that do?" Holly asked, trying to keep up with the pace of the discussion.

"Cheering charms make it where the person under it can't have an unhappy thought; therefore the Dementors theoretically couldn't affect you. It's the basic principle as behind the Patronus. It is just a person rather than an image."

"Of course," Harry commented as an afterthought. "I wouldn't recommend charging at a Dementor even after casting a Cheering Charm on yourself."

"What's wrong with just casting a Patronus Charm?" Holly asked. "Does there have to be a second way?"

Harry looked at Holly, completely serious. "Can you cast the charm, Holly?"

"Of course not, I'm only in fifth year!" She said looking at him as if he were insane.

"And how many seventh years could cast it last year?" He continued questioning, while Lupin and Moody looked on at the scene in slight consternation.

"Um, maybe 7 . . . oh," She said softly, and he decided to continue his point.

"If only seven students per year, and that seems to be higher than normal, can cast the Patronus Charm, and Aurors are the only Ministry personnel required to know the spell, Britain is highly vulnerable to Dementor attacks. But," he continued on a lighter note, not wanting to frighten Rose, "most, if not everyone, can cast Cheering Charms, so that might help. As a matter of fact . . ." he branched off, and started wondering if the Room of Requirement

could conjure Boggarts. He grinned, and stood up from the table. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go find a Dementor."

He turned and walked out of the Great Hall, knowing that the two adults would follow him. As if on cue, the two adults looked at each in incredulity, then stood up and chased after Collins.

They caught up to him just as he was walking up the staircase.

"And where," Moody growled as Harry smirked at him in amusement and inner triumph, "are you going to find a Dementor?"

"The Room of Requirement."

"The Room of what?" Remus questioned, easily keeping up with Harry's rapid pace, while Moody clunked right behind them.

"The Room of Requirement. I was told about it in my fifth year. It's a room, where if you actually find it, becomes anything you need it to be, as long as it doesn't harm the school."

"And this Room of Requirement doesn't think that a Dementor will harm the school?"

"I don't plan on making it actually create a Dementor. My greatest fear is a Dementor, well, at the moment anyway, so if it finds a Boggart, it will turn into a Dementor, with its Dementorish effects. Given, it won't be as strong, but it'll be strong enough to see if it will work. However, I am slightly wandless at the moment, so one of you will have to aim a Cheering Charm at it."

Remus looked at him oddly. "Wait. What do you mean, you're afraid of Dementors at the moment, and why would you even try this without a wand?"

"I knew that neither you or Moody would let me go off to find a Dementor on my own, since you both probably think I'm quite insane, something I wholeheartedly agree with on occasion. And you both have wands, so that is no longer a problem. I'm currently telling

myself several good reasons as to why I should be afraid of Dementors and my subconscious self is listening. I can only do that if I have a few minutes to prepare though. I had to learn that so I wouldn't scare the students in my class to death."

Harry grimaced, remembering failing miserably when Snape had captured a Boggart to attack him, and it hadn't been a Dementor for the first time.

"So, hopefully neither of you will lock me in a room filled Boggarts, though I'm sure it would be quite a show."

The two adults shared a look with each. This had quite reinforced any opinion of theirs that Collins was not all there.

Even more so when he started pacing in front of a blank wall on the seventh floor.

"What are you doing?" Moody asked, impatient because he had no idea what was going on.

Harry ignored them as he crossed the wall for the third time and a door suddenly appeared.

Smiling as Lupin's and Moody's jaws dropped, Harry opened the door and bowed. "Welcome to the Room of Requirements, place of Dementor-testing and secret clubs."

The grand entrance was slightly ruined when the two just looked at him with dumb-founded expressions. "It's a long story," he sighed. "Just go in." The two did so, and saw blank wooden walls, with nothing in the room besides a musty-looking cupboard in the middle.

"Is it always so drab-looking?" Remus pondered aloud. With a faint pop, the room had fuzzy pink rugs and orange painted walls, making the two adults adopt looks of disgust.

"No," Harry said dryly in response to Remus's question, "but I prefer drab to this."

At once the room turned back, though this time it had a fake window and fireplace.

“How . . .?” Remus asked hesitatingly, while Moody looked around in obvious suspicion.

“I have absolutely no idea. A house-elf named Dobby told me, and I took his advice. So, are you two going to admire the room all day, or confound the opinions of esteemed wizards around the world?”

Remus was about to be annoyed with Collin’s constant sarcasm, but swallowed his comment when he saw the seventeen-year-old look at the cupboard with a slight expression of fear on his face. Having seen very few real emotions cross his face, Remus realized exactly what Collins was doing: standing in close contact with a Dementor, very unpleasant memories, for the sake of finding a second way of defeating Dementors. He wondered what exactly Collins heard when near a Dementor.

Moody clunked over to where Remus was standing and aimed his wand at the cupboard door.

Harry faced the two with a mock stern look on his face. “Be warned. If either of you set the Cheering Charm on me and then refuse to do the counter-jinx, I will somehow bring the Ginny Weasley from my universe into this one and sic her on you!” He said this in such a way that neither was sure if he was joking.

Without allowing any emotion into his mind, Harry opened the cupboard and unleashed the Boggart.

At once, cold seeped into the room as a raggedly cloaked, hooded figure drifted out of the cupboard. The demon turned in Remus’ and Moody’s direction for an instant, but seemed to change its mind and headed for Harry. His mind immediately fogged from being so close, he heard voices and whispers from his past drift to the forefront of his mind.

“How does it feel to know you will soon betray everything you stood for?”

“Aaaaaah . . . did you love him, little baby Potter?”

“Bow to Death, Harry.”

"George! George, why aren't you getting up? No, no, not you, too!"

Clenching his jaw, Harry turned toward Remus. “Any time now,” he whispered weakly, and saw the werewolf aim a yellow beam at the Boggart. At once the voices started sounding like they were coming from a badly tuned radio, but the cold weakening feeling was still there.

He shook his head at Remus, hopefully communicating the fact that it didn’t work, and felt someone hit him with the Cheering Charm.

Harry felt a grin tugging at his lips, but his eyes widened as the Dementor only slowed down. On a field or in a town those seconds could be invaluable, but at such a close distance it changed nothing. His face paled and he walked trippingly backwards as the Dementor cornered him. Haunting screams echoed out of the corners of his mind.

Remus shared a quick look with Moody. Both had seen the Boggart slow down, but it continued its halting creep towards Collins. Seeing the teenager's face whiten drastically, Remus recklessly stepped forward into the cold, and winced at the full moon replaced the Dementor.

The werewolf hastily said “Riddikulus”, and Banished the Boggart back into the cupboard.

Harry stood shakingly and glanced at the fireplace, making it contain merrily crackling flames. He stared at the vibrantly colored fire before realizing that his reckless plan had somewhat succeeded.

All of that was fine and good, except Harry felt deliriously cheerful about that, more than was possibly normal. He felt the looming unease that he was about to make of a fool of himself before the unhappy thought was whisked away. With a grin on his face that no doubt looked out of place on his still scarred and haunted face, he faced Moody and Remus.

“Now that it halfway works, can you take this infernal charm off me?” He asked, all the while maintaining his new, strangely chipper personality. The two adults looked at each, and then pocketed their wands, smiling ominously.

“No, I think this works for you, laddie,” Moody said, his blue eye going haywire in amusement.

“Definitely, this whole happy thing fits you very well,” Remus concluded, and the two walked toward the exit.

‘Damn,’ Harry thought his inner voice reminiscent of a cartoon character, ‘I can’t even use wandless magic because they’ll get all suspicious!’

“Good,” Harry said, the odd remark stopping the co-conspirators in their tracks. “Now I have an excuse as to when I laugh over your charred remains.”

They froze, and eyed him to see if he was being truthful. With the maniacal smile on his face and a murderous glint in his ice cold eyes, they decided not to chance it, and ran to put as much space between themselves and Chris Collins as possible.

Holly scuffed morosely at the floor as she walked up to the library, her daily haunt. ‘There’s something strange about Chris Collins,’ she huffed. The way he just appeared with all those injuries, his extensive knowledge of Defense Against the Dark Arts, and the way he seemed to easily deflect questions about himself. She knew that he was about to say that he hadn’t eaten anything for a month, but changed it. She, too, had caught Uncle Remus’s look.

She also remembered overhearing that conversation between her parents and Uncle Remus. Unknown to them she had a Muggle sort of listening device in the living room. Completely untraceable and worked like a charm. She had overheard them mention something about different worlds, but wasn't sure if they had meant that literally. She grinned when her dad brought up being thrown into the wall - her godfather had told her about that, laughing all the while - but turned pale when Remus had mentioned Chris Collins using the Cruciatus Curse and numerous Dark spells. Now she was slightly wary about Collins, but wanted to find out more about him anyway.

She decided to collect as much knowledge as possible about this new mystery. She walked into the library and almost shrieked in alarm when the object of her thoughts was sitting at a table, furiously pouring over tomes of books.

He looked up at her when she walked in, and Holly saw him grinning widely, almost grotesquely, before he looked back down at his book.

"What are you grinning about?" She asked crabbily as she sat down across from him.

"Moody and Lupin put a Cheering Charm on me," he said pleasantly, though she felt sure that he would have been growling otherwise.

"Why don't you ask Madam Pomfrey to remove it?" she asked.

"I am not going back into that Hospital Wing!" He exclaimed, still in a light, happy tone. "And I don't happen to have a wand, so I'm stuck looking drunkenly happy until it wears off. In the mean time, however, I'm looking for my revenge."

"Oh," she said. "Need any help?"

"No, thank you," he replied absently. "Unless I'm allowed to hold you hostage at wand point and steal 20 years off their lives. Or transfigure you to look like Ginny Weasley in all her fury."

“You know Ginny Weasley?” Holly asked curiously. The quest for information had begun.

He stared at her for a second as if examining her mind, then nodded. “Yes, I know the one from my world.”

Holly almost gasped at how he answered the question she was most interested in.

Harry gave a small smirk at her gob smacked look. “You need to stop listening in on private conversations Holly. But yes, I am from a different dimension of sorts.”

Inwardly, Harry was questioning the wisdom of telling all of this to Holly, who obviously wasn’t supposed to know, but he felt like she could be trusted, a strong ally of sorts. ‘Not to mention she is my sister,’ Harry thought wryly, somewhat annoyed that his inner thoughts sounded like they had swallowed helium.

Holly stored this information in her mind while trying to not look completely baffled, and decided to get back to what she and Chris had been discussing before hand. She also decided that later she would research ways of people reading her mind.

“Okay,” Holly agreed. “Which would be more effective?”

“Ginny, probably. Less of a chance of them killing me anyway,” Harry said, and Holly saw a scheming look come into his eyes. “Can you do human transfiguration?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Fifth year, Collins, I’m a fifth year.”

“Fine, then. Can I borrow your wand?”

Holly looked at him with raised eyebrows somewhat suspiciously. ‘He’s used the Cruciatus Curse, Holly,’ she told herself. ‘Are you really going to let him have your wand?’ “If I lend you my wand, why don’t you just perform the counter-jinx on yourself?”

Chris seemed to look at her in shock. "What's the fun in that?" He asked smirking.

She grinned and handed over her wand. He passed the Marauder test, Dark magic or not.

At once, Harry started performing spells to make Holly's hair the fiery Weasley red, though it wasn't that far off to begin with, changed her face shape to that familiar heart, and turned her eyes a deep brown. After changing her robes so they looked somewhat darker in nature, he stepped back and nodded.

"You look like the epitome of an evil Ginny Weasley," he said and she smirked playfully, though it turned out looking slightly powerful and sadistic as opposed to cheerfully scheming.

"Okay, now you have to act like some dark avenger, and try to scare them without giving it away, okay?" She nodded in agreement and he gave her back her wand. "Are you sure you want them after you because of this? Lupin is a Marauder after all."

Holly grinned cheerfully, effectively threw away all his work at making Holly darkish in appearance.

"Don't worry, Dad and Sirius will no doubt be on my side."

Harry smiled softly, but didn't let Holly see his grief at that statement.

"Let's go find the victims," Harry said, and they left the library to find a werewolf and an Auror.

The two felonious evildoers were currently telling their exploit to the current population of Hogwarts, all of whom knew the strange story of Collin's universe traveling, and amid gales of laughter from those who had met the serious and unemotional Chris Collins. All except for Severus Snape.

"I'd watch out if I were you two," he said when the initial laughter died down. "Collins no doubt has his revenge in mind."

“You worry too much, Snape,” James Potter said cheerfully, easily able to imagine the Marauding werewolf and his Auror accomplice leaving Collins under the influence of a Cheering Charm. “Collins doesn’t have a wand. I don’t think he will be able to bring over a demonic Ginny Weasley from his universe any time soon.”

As soon as he said that, there was an unholy screech of anger and the doors of the Great Hall, where everyone currently was, were thrown open, showing the figure of a very irate and inhuman Ginny Weasley glaring at Remus and Moody.

“You!” she said in a carrying whisper.

Lightning crashed in the sky and in the Great Hall’s ceiling. Holly had loaned Harry her wand with a plea for special effects, and special effects he provided. “I travel cross-worlds to find that you have cursed Chris Collins!”

At this Harry walked into the Great Hall to step beside “Ginny”, his face still home to a unnatural smile, and as they raised their hands purplish-black flames appeared as if ready replacements for physical weapons.

Everyone watching in fantastical horror was pale as the two dimensional travelers seemed to grow taller and more fiendishly powerful.

“Fix it!” The image of Ginny commanded, and in a stuttering voice, Remus pointed his wand unsteadily at Harry and muttered the counter-jinx.

Moody had fallen over in pale-faced shock and Lupin looked no better.

Then one of the two figures burst into laughter while the other smirked lightly, and Harry, pulling Holly’s wand out of his sleeve, undid the glamours and special-effects until just two highly amused teenagers were left, with Holly back in her natural appearance. They

stared back at the adults who were still watching them in undisguised shock until Moody got up from his undignified position on the floor.

“You two!” He growled, but Harry merely looked at him and smirked, very obviously giving Holly back her wand to point out how easily they had been fooled.

Remus was just looking at them with a gob-smacked expression on his face as James Potter started laughing behind him, accompanied by someone else with shoulder-length black hair and dark blue eyes.

Harry gasped in shock and sorrow at seeing all three of the Marauders together, he no longer considered Wormtail part of that group, but no one saw or heard him except for Holly as they were all fixated on the two people who had just been laughing about their exploits.

Holly considered questioning Chris about it — she did have a wand after all, and could threaten him with innumerable tricks — but decided to file it away with any other odd knowledge about her new mystery and now friend.

Chapter 6: Surreal Encounters

Harry surveyed the people sitting throughout the Great Hall, drinking in the sight of the people around him. So many people he recognized, yet they were different in small, sometimes barely noticeable ways. 'Nymphadora Tonks,' he thought smilingly, 'is as clumsy as ever, still tripping over thin air.'

The young Auror was indeed in the process of tripping, though it wasn't over thin air. With a cry of frustration, the Metamorphmagus shrieked and started scolding Sirius who tried and failed to look innocent. Watching her kick her cousin in the shin, Harry once again wondered how much of Tonks's clumsiness was natural, and how much was in act.

Harry looked on in shock, though, as after Tonks had finished telling Sirius off, she sat firmly in Remus's lap and started complaining about his choice of friends.

"--erlin's sake, Remus! If that rabid mutt trips me one more time, I will find some ancient Flea Curse and he will never know peace again! Honestly, Marauders and their --oof!"

'A marvel way of keeping someone quiet,' Harry thought with raised eyebrows as he followed Holly to a table. The two seemed locked by the lips, but not for long if the others in the room had something to do about it.

"Moony and Nymphadora!" James started in scoldingly. "Honestly, someone would think that you two were a couple of hormonal teenagers, carrying on in such a way. There are children present!"

Remus made to jerk away, a blush already reddening his face, but Tonks just tossed a Leg-Locker Curse in James's direction and yanked Remus back, ignoring the interruption.

"Hey!" Holly interrupted. "What do you mean children in the room! I'll have you know that--"

"Shush, Holly, I wasn't talking about you," James said teasingly. "I was talking about Sirius and Collins."

"Hey!" the two aforementioned complained at the same time. Sirius continued his plea for adulthood. "What do you mean I'm a child? I'm 38 as you very well know. Just because I--"

"He must have gotten your IQ confused with your age," Harry and Severus said at the same time. Though, whereas Harry's comment was light-hearted, Snape's was sharp and condescending.

Sticking his tongue out at the Potions Master, Sirius turned and shot a glare at Harry. Shrugging innocently and pointing at Holly as if she had made the comment, Harry continued looking around at the people in the room, missing the speculative look the Animagus gave him.

Noting the differences in Tonks and Remus, Harry wondered what others were different. Half the people in the room Harry barely recognized or didn't know at all. There were two unknown Order members that caught his attention easily. From the shock of red hair, Harry identified them as Weasleys, but they were too old to be the twins, though they definitely had the same mischievous looks as the two troublemakers Harry had known.

Bypassing them for the moment, Harry turned his attention to the professors he knew to be in the Order. Snape, of course, was the same as ever, if not more snarky and sarcastic than the one Harry knew. He guessed this had something to do with Voldemort being alive, well, more than spirit, for the past sixteen years, not to mention the constant presence of the Marauders.

Minerva McGonagall seemed different from the strict Professor he remembered, but he couldn't point out why. Seeing the stern woman roll her eyes at the Marauders antics and make a comment to Snape, Harry grinned as he realized what it was. The Transfiguration Professor had always alluded to the fact that the Marauders were her favorite students. Harry supposed that it was difficult to remain a stern, thin-lipped disciplinarian when she and the rest of the staff were constantly pranked by them and possible protégés.

Harry stopped his observations as Holly poked him in the shoulder. "What is all the staring around for?" she asked. "If I was in your position, and I am now since Moody and Remus will be after me, too, I'd be making sure no one was sneaking up on me."

Harry grinned at his unknowing sister. She obviously was an accomplished eavesdropper, and had learned the tricks of getting away with it, but she had yet to learn a multitude of others Harry had while sneaking around the castle.

"Why do you think I pushed you to this table?" he asked and explained. "Our backs are to the wall, which adds extra protection. The torches on the wall would cast a shadow of anyone behind us on the table, see?" He raised his arm at the elbow and his arm's shadow fell completely straight against the table. "Also, there's a squeaking floorboard to our left, and we're too close to the edge for anyone to sneak up on us from the right."

He smirked in satisfaction as Holly looked critically at the surroundings to make sure that Harry's story matched the area. Raising her eyebrows at Collins's thorough security (wandless, at that) she turned back to him with a pleading expression on her face.

"Teach me?"

"Trust me, young grasshopper," Harry said in a manner mocking of Trelawney. "I'll teach you all you need to know about the fine art of sneaking, hiding, and manipulation of surroundings."

Holly looked unimpressed. "You mean you'll show me all the naturally good spots in Hogwarts for hiding in plain sight?"

Harry pointed an accusing finger at her. "Don't steal my thunder."

"Fine," Holly said pouting, and dug into the supper in front of her.

Harry looked at the food at the table, and felt his stomach clench uncomfortably at the thought. Having lived off sparse nutrition charms for the past month, even thinking about eating was making him feel

slightly nauseous. Grimacing, he pushed the plate a little farther away from him.

"Eat," Holly commanded, looking at him in some concern. "It's not poison, you know."

Harry glared at her, knowing as he did that he was being unfair. She rolled her eyes at his look and shrugged, knowing not to push.

"Well, hello..."

"...Munchkin 1..."

"...minus Munchkin 2..."

"...in the company of New Munchkin 3."

Harry looked up and saw the two almost-Weasleys he had seen before. Raising a haughty eyebrow, he looked at them mockingly.

"Tweedle-dee. Tweedle-dum," he answered with a nod.

Holly giggled at the Muggle reference, but it passed over the heads of the two wizards. They sat down in synchrony and Harry was once again forcibly reminded of the twins.

"We've heard some talk circulating around the Order that you're new in town," one said as the other nodded in agreement.

"Now on to business," the second continued, adopting a professional manner. "Name, date of birth, and criminal record, please."

"Canoozle Furgeson, December 1, 1876, and disruption of the public."

The two looked at each and laughed at the same time, then cutting it off rather suddenly.

"Funny, funny. Well, Canoozle, thanks for the information. Well, dear brother Gideon, now we can do the introductions."

Harry looked at them closely. "You're the Prewitts?"

"In the flesh. Why, were we handsome bachelors in your universe?" the second one, Gideon, asked.

"Perhaps professional pranksters?" the first one, who Harry knew to be named Fabian, continued.

"Actually, you two had very interesting job choices," Harry answered, leading them on as he made up a story. "It was actually before I knew about magic that I saw you. You actually were part of the Muggle world, and I saw you two driving this very large car around. Every once in a while one of you would jump out of the car and throw a huge bag into the machine."

"Hmm," one said in deep thought, "sounds like that night during summer of '86, doesn't it Fabian?"

"Yes, but I can't think for the life of bubble-wrap as to why we were in the Muggle world."

"Well," Harry suggested as Holly was in a silent fit of giggles, nearly turning purple, "you could always ask Mrs. Potter about it. She knows much more about the oddities of the Muggle world than I do."

"Sure thing," Gideon said and the two snapped off salutes before running over to the table Lily was at.

"Canoozle Furgeson?" Holly whispered, trying to get a serious face.

"Code name," Harry answered with a straight face, but cracked as Holly giggled again. 'So this must be what having a sister is like,' Harry thought somewhat mournfully. 'She certainly brings out my less serious side, and I can't manage to keep a straight face with her around. Maybe...' Harry angrily shook himself out of his thoughts. No, Voldemort must be defeated first, because he, Harry, intended to make waves and knock over Voldemort's cruise ship.

Severus Snape glanced over at Chris Collins suspiciously. Spying instincts had become exactly that, instincts, and he trusted no one unconditionally, not even Dumbledore or Minerva.

Probing with Legilimency, he tried to enter the seventeen-year-old's mind, reaching for thoughts and memories that could be clues, or, as every Slytherin knew would be eventually useful, blackmail.

Harry felt familiar wisps of Legilimency come near his shield and identified them as Snape's. Harry mentally smiled at Snape's predictability.

A year ago, Harry would have been spitting mad at the thought of someone, especially the Greasy Git, entering his thoughts, if he had been able to notice the mental invasion at all. But now he knew better, that Legilimency was a tool of war, that everyone was a suspect. Harry had agreed instantly with that concept, trusting very few people himself.

Snape had looked at him in sarcastic surprise that Harry wasn't fighting tooth and nail at the dishonorable spying method, but Harry had just grinned and shrugged. He reminded the Potions Master that Harry was almost a Slytherin, and he had better get used to it.

Currently, knowing that it would be idiotic to show Snape his full, indestructible shields, as Harry had just told everyone that his Occlumency wasn't very good to escape Veritaserum, Harry focused on the bemusing thought of Voldemort owning his own cruise ship.

Feeling Snape grasping his foremost thought, Harry focused on the scene, adding as many ridiculous details as possible. Voldemort would be sprawled on a deck chair, wearing sun glasses and holding a drink of orange alcohol of some sort, complete with umbrella and crazy straw. Death Eaters would be sitting in various places, as Bellatrix Lestrange knocked on the nearby cocktail bar to get a drink. Harry couldn't help but vindictively make the hated Death Eater spit out her drink in disgust, having taken a solid swig of sour milk. The image swooped downward to see Lucius Malfoy steering the ship and idly dancing to a silent tune as he had seen in some Mickey Mouse cartoon years ago.

Feeling incredulous amusement coming from Snape's thoughts, Harry couldn't help but add him into the picture. He made Snape sneak down to the hull of the ship, cackling evilly and wearing the usual overbearing cloak in a manner reminiscent of 1930 American movie villains. Rubbing his hands together maliciously and twirling a ridiculous mustache, Snape yanked a chain and removed a plug from the bottom of the ship. Water began pouring into the ship and Snape vanished in a puff of smoke. The Death Eaters on the deck formed a conga line, completely unaware of the rushing sea water steadily sinking the Muggle ship.

Harry chuckled quietly as Snape yanked out of his thoughts with a bemused expression on his face, as if wondering for Harry's sanity. Harry watched as Albus, obviously noticing something, asked him a question, but Snape just shook his head with wide eyes and refused to say anything.

Not being able to resist, Harry wandlessly changed Snape's drink to look like Voldemort's when no one was watching. Snape reached for his drink a couple seconds later and froze as he saw it. The deer-in-the-headlights expression was perfect and Harry looked right at Snape with a smirk, attracting the attention of the Potions Master and the Headmaster.

Raising his hand in a mock salute, Harry chuckled and turned back to his table as Dumbledore asked again what happened. Not getting an answer, the Headmaster shrugged and absently started twirling his mustache.

Bringing up his shields again, Harry concluded the encounter, which had taken about five seconds throughout. He joined Holly in watching the Prewitt twins run to Lily's table and began hounding her for information.

"Lily, we're in need of your impressive Muggle culture skills!" Fabian said, nudging James out of the seat next to her, Gideon just hopping on to the table itself.

With a disgruntled, "Oof!" James fell off the bench onto the floor and hastily hexed the offender's hair into a replica's of Snape's.

"Alright, what do you want, Tweedle-dee?" Lily asked in amusement.

"Well, I was wonderin-- Hey, Furgeson over there called me the exact same thing! What's a Tweedle-dee?"

In confusion Lily looked where Fabian was pointing and saw Collins looking on the scene with amusement. "Furgeson?" she mouthed, but turned back around when Harry shrugged.

"Tweedle-dee is just a common nickname," she responded. "Was that it?"

"No," Gideon cut in smoothly. "And I assume that Tweedle-Dum is just another one of those nicknames?" Hiding her grin at their ignorance of Muggle literature, Lily coughed and croaked, "Yeah, just another nickname."

"Okay then," Gideon continued. "Furgeson over there said he knew us back in his world...Wait, everyone here knows that Furgeson is from an alternate universe, right?"

Harry groaned as everyone looked on in amusement. "I'm sure they do now, Prewitt. But no matter, it's just a practically impossible oddity of magic that the Ministry would be after me for, nope, no matter at all."

"Good to know," Gideon said with a grin and started explaining to Lily what he wanted, though now he seemed to have an audience out of pretty much everyone in the Great Hall.

"What part of Muggle culture has people driving a khar and throwing huge bags in it off the street?"

All the people who were Muggle-born or raised laughed at this. Tonks in particular was tickled having heard about various nonmagical jobs from her father.

"For one thing, it's a car," Lily corrected in full professor mode. "And I'm sure Collins was just joking."

Sharing a look, the two relations of Fred and George asked, "Who's Collins?"

Lily pointed at Harry, who gave the twins a look like he didn't know what she was talking about.

"He's not named Collins," Fabian said confidently. "His name is Canoozle Furgeson."

Harry grinned but turned to look at the doors when a strange smell wafted through the Great Hall. Sniffing, Harry almost gagged at the strong coppery smell. Turning to Holly, he quietly asked, "Do you smell anything?"

Holly shook her head, looking at him oddly. "No. Why?"

He shook his head and stood up from the table. He inhaled the scent again but no one else seemed to notice it. Shaken that no one was smelling this scent either, Harry walked along the table, taken the long way to the Great Hall doors, which he was certain was the source.

People watched him with raised eyebrows as he walked almost hypnotically towards the doors, but Harry didn't notice until he saw Remus Lupin stand, also looking at the doors.

The two shared a glance then they both walked forward, pushing open the large doors to reveal the Entrance Hall.

Nothing was there.

But the smell almost knocked the two over and without discussion they ran for the doors that would lead to the grounds of Hogwarts. Harry barely realized that the people in the Great Hall were exclaiming about their strange behavior rather loudly, and a few were chasing after them.

Harry paused as the intoxicating smell got stronger. He knew better than just rush to look at something not everyone could smell. Reaching into the pocket of his cloak, Harry pulled out a knife he had imagined from the Room of Requirement just earlier that day. The point glinted ominously as he lifted the hideously sharp weapon into an offensive grip and wrenched open one of the double doors.

The darkening sky was swiftly plummeting into an inky black, but there was enough light from the reddish sun to see the grounds. Harry saw no shadows of anything living, human or otherwise and glanced at Remus to see if the werewolf had seen anything.

Remus was staring straight at the steps, looking unblinkingly at a strange herb thrown haphazardly onto the front stair. Harry took a hesitant step towards the strange plant but stopped as the coppery smell nearly knocked him over and he unconsciously growled as the hair on the back of his neck rose forebodingly.

Starting in surprise as he heard the Potions Master softly curse, Harry noticed Lupin quiver as the light from the crescent moon shone from behind a cloud and, inexplicably, began to turn into a werewolf.

Holly and Rose screamed as Remus's face elongated and his hands turned into unforgiving claws. The rest of the Order members drew their wands, and James and Sirius seemed prepared to turn into animals to lead away the werewolf.

Deciding it was time to stake his claim as reckless Gryffindor, Harry ran towards the werewolf, who had settled down on four legs and was snarling hungrily at the large group of humans before him. Plucking up the herb with his left hand, Harry waved it trying to get Lupin's attention. A small part of his mind noticed the werewolf's zeroed stare seemed exactly the same as Mrs. Norris's when Harry had put a bag of catnip on a tall bookcase the cat couldn't reach.

Hearing the exclamations of those behind him, Harry's eyes widened as he saw Moony about to charge.

Harry looked uncertainly at the werewolf. "As holder of this plant, can I tell you to stay away from humans?"

The werewolf charged, and Harry decided to take that as a 'no'.

Running backwards, he saw Moony's eyes stay locked on the strange plant and the beast ran after him, choosing to ignore the multitude of people in favor of the strange pull of the plant.

"Oh good, you'll be chasing me now," Harry quipped as he turned and bolted, hearing the werewolf howl and chase after him.

James and Sirius shared a quick glance as their friend unexplainably changed into a werewolf. The strange plant, the look on Snape's face proved that it was unidentifiable, seemed to trigger the transformation.

Holly and Rose screamed, and James pushed them behind him, towards the back of the group. He turned back around to see Collins look at the weed curiously, before unconcernedly picking it up, as if there wasn't a werewolf a couple meters away.

"Are you insane?" James exclaimed as the seventeen-year-old looked inquisitively at the werewolf before running backwards holding out the offending plant like bait.

The group waited with baited breath as Moony charged at Collins. The reckless teen seemed to finally realize the danger and run at full speed, leading the magical animal away from the group.

"Damn, look at him go!" Tonks yelled as Harry put some distance between him and the werewolf. "That kid is fast!"

Sirius rolled his eyes at his cousin's comment but gaped as he looked back at the two werewolves fighting on Hogwarts's grounds.

He blinked. 'Two werewolves?'

He looked closer at the two and immediately recognized the one that was his friend, aggressively snarling and clawing at the obviously younger werewolf. The second one had a rougher, more jagged appearance, with numerous scars and with his right ear torn to shreds. Despite the unpromising look, Sirius noted the sharper jaws

and more lethal claws, and knew that Collins, in his unexplainable werewolf form, was more dangerous than his bookworm friend.

His observations were cut short by a mild curse from James as he watched the chase.

"James!" Lily scolded. "Watch your mo--Bloody Merlin!"

A mock-rebuke was on James's lips when he saw Collins, seemingly fed up with blocking Remus's attacks without harming him, spun around and snarled at Moony. Even from their viewpoint meters away, they all saw the vicious gleam in Collin's animalistic eyes, and the cowed expression on Remus's face.

Harry, having temporarily stopped Lupin in his tracks, sped towards the group of people watching the scene idiotically.

'A group of Aurors, professors, and Order members, and what do they do when faced with a werewolf?' Harry sarcastically thought as he bounded the Hogwarts steps and transformed back into himself.

"They stand around and do nothing," he answered himself out loud. Not allowing time for a response, Harry threw the unknown herb he was holding aside and grabbed the wand from Lily's, who was nearest, hand.

He muttered a rapid string of rough Latin and conjured a thick cage around Lupin, who, after submitting to Harry's authoritative glare, had stayed put and howled at the half-hidden moon.

Harry shoved the wand back into Lily's hands and glared at the group. "Thanks for the help."

"No problem," James quipped, and Harry threw his hands up in frustration.

"Ruddy useless group, you are. 'Oh let's stand here and watch the killer werewolf chase after Collins after he distracted him for us.' No wonder Voldemort is in control," he grouched and picked up the plant

to analyze it, ignoring the protests of everyone else at his insinuation of their incompetence.

Snape and Dumbledore walked over to look at the herb as well.

"I have absolutely no idea what this is," Harry said bluntly. "If I didn't know any better I'd say it looks like a mutation."

Snape grumbled his disagreement. "You don't know everything, Collins. It could just be a plant that was discovered in your world that you never bothered to study."

Harry grunted. "Must have been the Potions teacher. Anyway," he continued as Snape glared at him while Dumbledore chuckled, "you're the Potions Master. Can't you figure out how long the effects of it are?"

"Based on the narrowness of the leaves, I'd say that the effects are caused by proximity. It seems to only affect werewolves, and Lupin should be fine now that he's far enough away from it."

Sure enough, Harry turned to hear a muffled spell and explosions rocked the solid walls Harry had created, until one surrendered to the force and collapsed.

"Merlin," Remus said as he stepped out. "What in the name of magic did you make those walls with, Collins?"

"Magic," Harry replied dryly and handed the plant to Snape. "Here you go. You can decipher the evil plant. So, Lupin, is April Fool's Day celebrated in August here, or are the Centaurs extremely ticked with you?"

"Ha, ha," Lupin said, eying the plant and not coming within five or so meters. "I blame the Death Eaters. They must have developed or created it, though I would have thought that they would not tip their hand and wait to use it at a better time. Besides," the werewolf continued as Harry looked smug, having his prediction supported, "how did you turn into a werewolf?"

"Animagus," Harry answered simply, grinning wickedly. "One of the many reasons Mrs. Norris continues to hate me."

"A werewolf Animagus?" McGonagall questioned. "I didn't think that was possible."

In response Harry transformed back into a werewolf, wagging his tail at the incredulous looks he got.

"Aww, he's so cute," Holly deadpanned and Harry shot a glare at her.

"No he's not," Tonks said with a grin. "He looks like he got trampled by a herd of thestrals. And bone-thin to boot. I've seen cuter scarab beetles."

Harry undid the transformation. "What is that supposed to mean?" he asked indignantly. "I save your sorry carcass, and you insult me!"

"Oh, please, Collins, I could have defended myself."

Harry grinned. "Against what? A misplaced chair and gravity?"

The Marauders laughed at that, and Tonks stuck her tongue out. "Oh, I'll get you for that one, Collins."

Harry grunted and turned to face the grounds, his eyes flicking towards familiar shadows and places to hide.

"I don't suppose," Harry drawled, "that while you were standing here doing nothing, you managed to see any Death Eaters?"

He looked behind him to see a couple guilty looks, but Sirius, Tonks, Kingsley and Moody all shook their heads.

"There was no one moving, Collins," Moody growled, "and I'm sure one of you two would have noticed anyone with strange scents."

Harry nodded at the observation and watched as the ex-Auror turned his glare on James. "What's your excuse, Potter?"

The only other Auror in the group pointed mutely at the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Underneath the shadows of the swaying black trees was a contingent of thestrals, watching them with empty eyes and flicking their tails nervously, somehow attracted to either the commotion or the plant.

Harry looked at the animals and crossed his arms in annoyance. "They stood there, just watching the whole time? Oi!" Harry yelled at the gaunt animals. "You didn't happen to catch anyone, did you?"

The thestrals just stared back, and everyone took that as a 'no.'

"Go find some other entertainment then, you worthless lizards!" Harry yelled with a grin.

The thestrals reared up in an affronted manner and marched back into the Forest. One, who Harry vaguely remembered as being the leader Tenebrus, turned and pawed the ground with his back hoof, scraping dirt condescendingly at him before running off to join the rest of the herd.

"Evil horses," Harry muttered as everyone started congregating back to the Great Hall. "Always in the way when not needed, but if you don't have something to immediately offer them, they don't do anythin--Hey!"

Harry spun around to see Gideon and Fabian Prewitt glaring at him in a manner twin to Fred and George.

"Canoozle Furgeson, huh?" Fabian asked with a stern manner.

"You should know better--"

"--than to try and prank--"

"--the Masters!" they finished together.

"I resent that claim!" James said as Remus and Sirius nodding in agreement. "You just wait till Peter gets back, and you'll regret ever thinking yourself as prankster!"

The whole conversation had an air of practice about it that Harry couldn't help wonder if Hogwarts had to deal with the constantly battling Marauders and so-called 'Masters.'

"Oh, you just wait," Gideon promised with a grin. "When our nephews get here, and you four amateurs won't stand a chance!"

"We'll see about that," a new voice said in challenge.

Peter Pettigrew stood on the steps to Hogwarts with a dusty traveling cloak and a roughly wrapped package in his arms. Despite the tiredness apparent on his face, his eyes gleamed at the thought of another prank war with the red-headed duo or, occasionally, quartet.

"Wormtail!" James and Sirius cried out pompously. "We welcome you to the fine establishment of Hogwarts, built in 1922..."

"It was not built in 1922, you ignorant prats! Haven't you ever read Hogwarts, A History," Remus lectured and glared as his three friends mouthed the familiar phrase along with him.

"Yes, yes, as nice as it is to be bombarded as soon as I finish a mission, is anything new? And valid?" He amended before anyone could answer.

"Well, Hogwarts has recently adopted a dimensional traveler," James said, forgetting Snape's warning. "Don't know that much about him, actually, so you can ask him yourself. Hey, Collins--"

The Marauders looked around the stairs leading to Hogwarts, but didn't see the teenager anywhere.

Harry glared at the man who had betrayed his parents in his home universe. The logical side of his brain said that they were only the same in name and blood. That this Wormtail never became a Death

Eater, and was in fact a member of the Order for sixteen years more than the other Pettigrew.

But the illogical, impulsive side of him rushed with hatred at the sight of him, and put him at the top of Harry's 'People Never to Trust' List. He wondered savagely if this one had never been caught as a traitor, or just didn't have the courage to join Voldemort in the first place.

But the sight of all four Marauders together, happy and healthy, when Harry was used to one traitor, two dead, and the last run-down by a prejudiced society, was slightly surreal.

Unsure if he would snap and try to curse Pettigrew or confess his identity then and there, Harry fled.

Quietly easing open the large doors, he practically ran past the Great Hall, forsaking its warmth and friendly chatter for the solitude of the rest of the castle. Once past the populated section of Hogwarts, Harry ran, not caring where ended up or how loud he was.

He finally paused, out of breath, in front of the statue of the hump-backed, one-eyed witch and sank down next to it.

'All of them here...' he thought. 'Surely I can just tell them. Voldemort would hardly think for me to be on his radar. If I just don't run across too many of the Slytherins and keep my head down, at least until graduation. A real, living family is more important than this war, anyhow.'

He shook his head in self-disgust. He couldn't do that, he knew that without even thinking about it. He had fought against Voldemort since he was eleven; the fighting, suspicion, and paranoia were part of him. Also that prophecy: for neither can live while the other survives. He had never understood that line so clearly until now. He couldn't claim his family, couldn't live peacefully, while it remained unfinished.

Harry analyzed himself even further. Would he be able to handle being part of a family? Fending for himself, not having to defend his actions to any but Ron and Hermione, not having rules and guidelines. Was he really prepared to give up that freedom in exchange for a

family that he would put in even more danger, four more people that he would constantly worry about in battle?

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He couldn't go up to them now, and admit that he was their son, one who didn't trust them enough to tell them his name first-off.

How could they accept him anyway? He fully admitted to using Dark Magic (not that Harry appreciated that name for that brand of magic). He had used the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange.

Not to mention the deadly encounters that seemed to happen every year. Fighting for the Sorcerer's Stone, killing a Basilisk and Riddle's seventeen-year-old imprint (which, Harry realized with a bit of foreboding, he'd have to do again at some point), helping Sirius escape Hogwarts with his soul intact, explaining why Sirius was in danger of not having his soul intact, the rebirth of Voldemort, getting Sirius killed, and finding that he, Harry, would murder or be murdered by the Darkest Wizard of the age.

How on Earth could Harry explain that? Along with numerous other encounters with Dementors, Ministry officials, the murder on Harry's hands?

Harry shook his head. He wouldn't be able to stand seeing parental disappointment directed at him. Mrs. Weasley was the closest thing to a parent he had had, and Harry cringed and nearly ran in the other direction when the head of the Weasley bunch delivered her stern glare.

So he had no option but to continue his masquerade as Chris Collins, and try not to act like he knew most of these people, including not trying to kill Pettigrew.

The rat had better, however, not cross any lines, because Harry didn't believe in Dumbledore's theory of second chances. Or even first chances in this matter.

Thinking about his family raised other questions as well. What happened to the other version of himself? Did he die at the hands of

Voldemort on Halloween without Pettigrew's assistance, or had he never been born here? He couldn't very well go up to people and ask if a Harry James Potter was alive here, so that meant combing through Hermione's refuge, the Hogwarts Library.

But would they, his friends, be different, too? Hermione and Ron would never have become friends if Harry hadn't dragged Ron off to save her from the troll, but Quirrell, who had let the troll in, was never possessed by Voldemort's barely alive spirit, since Voldemort was alive and well. Did that mean his two best friends were still barely civil to each other? Or would some strange quirk of fate make them friends anyway?

Were the Slytherins the same, with Voldemort a powerful force in Britain? Those who had been neutral in his world, were they avid supporters of the Dark Wizard here? Was Malfoy still salvageable from following the path of Malfoy Sr.?

Harry couldn't answer any of those questions until September when he would be enrolled here, probably under the guise of an exchange student from one of the smaller schools.

He continued to sit by the old statue and escape route to Hogsmeade, lost in his thoughts and queries.

"Presenting Peter Persnickety Pettigrew, back from...whatever he was doing!" Sirius announced grandly, if a bit falteringly.

Peter, once shy and clumsy, had overcome that with years of being a Marauder. He also rationalized that one of the wayward pranks might have had some strange effect on him, not that he told any of the other three that, for fear of them trying flying spider monkeys in Christmas crackers ever again.

He bowed and walked pompously into the Great Hall while holding on tightly to the package he was holding.

"And now presenting Peter Persnickety Pettigrew's alter ego, Bethany!" James announced with a straight face.

Peter whirled around with a mock scowl on his face. "No, Bethany is in Hawaii. That's just Sirius."

"Hey!" A protest met deaf ears as most chuckled at the Dog Animagus's affronted look.

"Ah, Mr. Pettigrew," Dumbledore greeted. "I trust it was successful."

"Yes, sir. 500 lemon drops from Brazil."

A pause as everyone looked at him in disbelief.

"Or ancient text on immortality rituals that Voldemort found about 35 years ago, whatever you want to call it."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as Peter held out the book titled '500 Lemon Drops from Brazil' and he took the book to his office, excusing himself for the night and hastily performing the spell to take off the book's illusion. Perhaps tonight the way to get rid of some of Voldemort's power would be found.

Fawkes trilled and hummed as Dumbledore entered the office, pointing the Headmaster's attention to a haughty looking owl looking imperiously across the room. Scowling as he recognized the symbol on the letter, Dumbledore took the message and ignored the owl, which left, hooting indignantly at his treatment and the helter-skelter condition of the office.

Breaking the seal and flipping open the heavy parchment, Albus quickly read the letter.

Sir Albus Dumbledore,

The Ministry congratulates you on the exemplary standards of last year's testing and academic achievement. To continue such standards across the country, the Minister and a small contingent of government officials, along with selected members of the Board of Hogwarts Governors, will be touring the school on August 8 to take notes of the quality of conditions of the school.

The Ministry bids you good evening, and realizes that as it is summer, not all teaching staff will be present. However, those attending the tour will not miss the opportunity to view the syllabi and will request an explanation of every class, professor present or not.

Sincerely,

Percy Weasley,

Junior Under-Secretary of Minister Crouch

"Damn," Dumbledore commented sourly. "I was hoping to avoid this."

Snape looked at the plant in consternation. It was immune to all tests, spells, or potions for identifying what it was. The properties he was certain of were forcing the werewolf transformation due to near proximity, its physical appearance, it contained a rather ripe liquid that refused to be identified as well, and forced those able to transform into werewolves to come within near proximity, whether in human form or no.

His last hope was a potion of his own creation. If it didn't work, than he would have to just label the plant as unknown and store it in one of the jars all his students loved making stories about.

The jars, of course, had nothing less innocent than the basic ingredients as found in the student cupboard, but seeing murky jars waving at them with unknown substances seem to unnerve children. And if that made them a little bit more observant in his class, he didn't have a problem.

The cauldron in front of him hissed, bubbling angrily at being ignored for a bit. He magically copied the plant using a little-known spell, and placed it slowly into the frothing potion. Suddenly calm, the potion seemed to be mulling over the answer, before golden letters appeared above it.

Mixture of Unknowns

Created: 12-15-97

Snape blinked at the label in confusion. December of this year hadn't passed yet, unless... Snape nodded to himself, having forgotten that this particular potion had the stubborn opinion that each year began in April. The plant had become fully grown, or fully created, March 15 of this year.

"Evanesco," the Potions Master absently cast, as he thought over what he knew. A name and any additional qualities was the information he was missing, and he was loath to admit he knew less than everything about this herb.

Sighing and putting the plant in stasis so it wouldn't rot or dry out, Snape pulled out another project of his, a project that the Dark Lord had requested.

Loud voices echoed down the hallway Harry was currently sitting in, his glassy eyes hurriedly blinking as he came back to reality. He stood and walked seamlessly to the end of the corridor, unwilling to talk to anyone while he was in such a reflective mood.

"--And then the idiot wizard says, 'Oh, you managed to get that Lemon Drop book? I don't suppose you'd be interested in a Peppermint book as well?' I declined and he walks off about 5 or ten steps, casts a glamour, then comes back and does the same thing all over again! What was I supposed to do: not Transfigure his clothes into that long-lasting Teletubbies suit?"

"Yes, Peter, civility is always a start," a dry voice replied, and Harry recognized his mother speaking. Then the voice changed to allow a hint of humor in it. "Which one did you change it into, by the way?"

"Er, I couldn't decide," Pettigrew said, "so it kind of ended up being a mixture of all four."

A cacophony of laughter swelled up, and Harry hastily backed away further. There was no point in staying.

"So this Collins fellow is from some other universe, dimension, whatever the technical term is?" Pettigrew asked, and Harry paused, listening to the conversation once more.

"Are you sure, though? Because it's hard to tell who is on what side. He may be here as an infiltrator, and curse us with who-knows-what."

It was unbelievable that Pettigrew, of all people, making such a comment about someone, who had suffered first-hand at the rat's betrayal. Oh, now he couldn't resist making a comment, previous thoughts of acting nicely completely discarded.

"Don't worry, Pettigrew," Harry said loudly, and silence descended among the people in the corridor behind him. "I only fatally curse those who really deserve it."

Harry turned and watched the four Marauders and Lily staring at him warily from quite a ways away, looking somewhat pale at being overheard.

"I haven't decided whether you fit into that category or not."

Chapter 7: Hints of the Past and Future

Harry's eyes widened as he saw Madam Rosmerta run from her burning bar. A Death Eater laughed coldly as he intercepted her escape and cast a painful bludgeoning hex. His face twisting in anger, Harry pointed his wand towards the beam of light.

"Excerio malse!" He hissed, and gold light shot from his wand to intercept the Death Eater's curse. Harry prepared to Stun the masked man as Madam Rosmerta got away, but turned around when he heard someone hiss his name in Parseltongue.

"Potter!" Lord Voldemort yelled, his wand pointing at a bloody-faced Luna. "I believe I have something that belongs to you."

Harry snarled wordlessly and a deadly curse was about to leave his mouth when the blond girl shrieked in pain, Voldemort smirking in victory.

All the fighting around had stopped, as if everyone knew this was the defining moment of the battle.

Harry grimaced but didn't lower his wand.

"What do you want, Riddle?" he demanded, using the Dark Lord's hated name.

Voldemort's face twisted in disgust before becoming forebodingly amused once more. "You know very well what, Potter. The Lovegood girl's fate is in your hands. You can take her place, or watch her death."

Luna glared fearlessly at the wizard in front of her. "You're not too much of a Dark Lord, are you? Resorting to kidnapping fifth years? Shame on you, no wonder not even even the Gragglesnouts will keep you company--"

"Silence, foolish girl! Let Mr. Potter make his choice."

Harry looked apologetically at his friends. Hermione gazed at him tearfully before nodding her head in understanding, as did Neville. The two Weasleys were nowhere in sight.

"Amendum Grassium," Harry said in a low voice, initiating the agreement spell, then called out to Voldemort. "You will leave this place, you and your Death Eaters, without causing any more death, damage, or destruction to the buildings or people of Hogsmeade. You and your Death Eaters will never hurt or kill any Weasley, Granger, Lovegood, Longbottom, or family member of any student at Hogwarts."

Voldemort grinned evilly and nodded his head. "Agreed."

After the master finished the half-completed agreement spell, the Death Eaters bound the unresisting form of Harry. Voldemort aimed his wand carelessly at Minerva McGonagall as Harry watched helplessly. "Avada Kedavra."

Harry shot straight up, gasping for air and shivering. The dream was so vivid, a memory that replayed crystal clear almost every night.

The worst part, Harry realized as he swept aside the bed hangings and went to sit on the window seat of his room, was that the dream always ended there, because he never found out if McGonagall dodged the curse or not.

The strict, formidable teacher was Harry's favorite, besides Remus Lupin, of course. She always stood unwaveringly on the side of whoever was wronged, Gryffindor or no. She had become a pillar of Gryffindor stubbornness, a sort of obstacle you had to get on the good side of as a rite of passage through Hogwarts.

The cat Animagus was the same here, Harry thought with a smile, before his smile faded. He had found that out after a short but painful argument the night before.

Harry shook his head at his own stupidity. After his snarling comment at Pettigrew, all four of the Marauders, with a little help from Lily, had torn into him, yelling about threatening the rat Animagus. Harry had

been prepared to argue to the death when McGonagall had swooped in, looking severe and, Harry winced at the memory, extremely annoyed.

"What is the meaning of this ruckus?" the stern Professor demanded, glaring equally at Harry, the Marauders, and Lily.

"Oh, you mean besides Collin's comment about killing Peter? Nothing really, Minerva." James bit out, glaring at Harry suspiciously.

Harry shook off the look, but cringed a little bit when Remus and Sirius did the same thing, before reminding himself that they were not the people he knew and knew him.

"You must be talking about after Pettigrew accused me of being a Death Eater," Harry responded icily. "Completely foolish of me to be offended."

'Offended not being the right word,' Harry thought darkly, not knowing his observation was mentally repeated by Lily. 'More like murderous.'

"Can't exactly blame him, can you, Collins?" Sirius retorted. "You look fairly Death Eater...-y?"

Harry snorted in amusement as Sirius's comeback fell rather flat. "Bravo, Black. I'm hurt, knowing I look, what was the phrase? Death Eater-y."

McGonagall's glare of immediate detention stopped any squabbling that might have followed.

"Collins," she began heatedly, and Harry fumed at being singled out first. "You know very well that we're at war. Of course people are going to be cautious around people they don't know, especially those who swoop around and threaten them." Harry muttered something under his breath, but McGonagall chose to ignore him. "Now, everyone in this castle is fighting against You-Know-Who, so stop wasting your time acting against those on your side! Besides, if you act dark and silent and untrustworthy--don't give me that look!--then

people will think you're dark and untrustworthy, as it's obvious their impression of you being silent will immediately be proven wrong!"

Harry scowled and crossed his arms as the Marauders grinned in triumph.

"And you five," McGonagall continued, spinning around to glare at the other culprits. "How dare you go around accusing other people of being Death Eaters?"

"Well, I didn't really accuse him of being a Death Eater..." Peter began hesitantly.

"Oh, then what did you do?" she asked with thin lips.

"Of erm, being an infiltrator, and, er--"

"Preparing to curse us with who-knows-what," Sirius finished rather unhelpfully.

"If not a Death Eater, what did you expect him being an infiltrator of, an Order of Phoenix Fan Club, being prepared to curse you with pleas for autographs?"

Harry snickered at the mental image of him hounding Snape and Mundungus Fletcher for autographs. He would never have survived the scorching glares. He quieted down as McGonagall glanced warningly at him.

"Yes, I know that security is heightened, Mr. Pettigrew, but seeing as how you know nothing about the one you're currently accusing, you should be glad Mr. Collins didn't hex you right off! Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," all five of them chanted.

McGonagall nodded at them and prepared to head once more for her office. "I expect you to behave as well, Collins," she said, not leaving Harry a chance to reply.

Harry shook his head again. That was definitely not the right foot Hermione was always talking about putting first when Ron and Harry glared at unknown Ministry members.

He stretched and walked over to the door. He eased it open, even though he knew very few people would be up and around. It would be best if no one saw where he was going.

His goal of being quiet was soon foiled, as Harry walked past a suit of armor and a gray-furred projectile leaped onto his head, spitting mad with fully drawn claws to boot.

"Bloody--effing--psychotic cat!" Harry muttered fiercely as he wrestled with an irate Mrs. Norris that decided his head would be a nice place to implement revenge. "Get off my--Ow!"

Harry had committed the ultimate sin and mistake of yanking the cat's tail, hoping that that would get the feline to back off.

Spitting with rage and lost dignity, the old cat yowled and slammed its paw right into Harry's eye.

Face screwing up in pain, Harry forced his hands under Mrs. Norris's stomach and jerked them up, loosening the determined animal's grip on his head.

Mewling and complaining, the cat refused to let go, and added the further foothold of biting down on Harry's left ear.

Growling as the cat seemed to hiss in triumph, Harry smirked. "You want to stay on my head, demon cat, you get to stay on my head!"

Mrs. Norris froze, feeling that something wasn't quite right, and the positions had changed. However, she refused to admit defeat and continued to hold on.

Harry grinned evilly, and knowing that he was almost on the first floor, bolted down the staircase quickly, purposely jarring the foe of all Hogwarts students, and ran towards the main doors of Hogwarts, whooping a war cry with a devious plan in mind.

"No, Rose, it's Rodusa Colorio to change people's hair pink. You have to swish the wand at the 'lor' part. Got it?"

Rose nodded, not really paying attention as Holly got into one of her study moods. The fifth year, much to the nine-year-old's dismay, seemed to forget that Rose didn't even have a wand.

"Holly, stop teaching your sister, and come help us think of the Sorting Feast Prank!" Peter called, and Holly rose, taking her plate with her, to the only other table in the Great Hall.

Halfway there, she paused as shouts and yowls echoed from out of the Great Hall. Hurriedly tossing her plate back on the table, she ran for the doors to see what was going on. Everyone else in the room followed, except Snape, Dumbledore, and McGonagall, who all rolled their eyes, not really being surprised about whatever stunt had been pulled now.

Dumbledore looked up from the Head Table just in time to see a person-sized blur with a furry, wailing, gray cat rush past the doors and clatter outside to the grounds.

He flicked his wand at the Great Hall wall to make it see-through, curious as to what was going on.

He watched in trepidation as the person headed straight for the chilly lake.

Harry chuckled as the cat bounced on his head, trying desperately to get off but was afraid to leap onto the ground. Before Mrs. Norris got the chance to gather her strength, Harry reached the bank of the lake and leaped in head first.

The cat swelled as its fur stuck straight out in horror of being near water, before gravity grabbed it and forced it into the lake. Hissing and fighting to get out of the icy water, the cat jerkily began pawing its way back to the bank.

Harry, climbing easily out of the Lake, watched gleefully as the cat's head poked out of the water, her fur lopsided and dripping, slicked onto her tiny head. Mrs. Norris's eyes gleamed yellow with hatred and started yowling once more in challenge even as she crawled her way clumsily to the bank.

He lost it as the wet cat climbed completely out of the water, perhaps two-thirds its usual size. Ignoring her human enemy who was currently howling with glee, Mrs. Norris mewed in dismay as her coat completely deflated under the weight of the water and her tail dragged limply along the ground. Her whiskers drooped from having beads of water and she hissed without being able to conjure her usual haughty and mean appearance.

Chuckling, Harry took pity on the poor creature and carried her back into the castle. She fought free near the Great Hall, and Harry let her go only to see the cat book it towards Minerva McGonagall, the one person who would probably have pity on her.

Everyone in the Great Hall turned their heads swiftly to follow a wet streak heading straight for the stern Transfiguration teacher, who pursed her lips at seeing a fellow feline dripping wet.

"Who dunked Mrs. Norris in a bucket of water again?" She asked dangerously, looking at the four usual culprits.

"She started it," Harry said walking into the Great Hall, also dripping wet and showing signs of the struggle between himself and the cat. "I just happened to end it."

Holly rolled her eyes as Collins walked in with a red left ear and lines of three scratches covering most of his face. "Only you could get an old cat to attack you," she said scoldingly, and Harry shrugged.

"I actually hadn't done anything to her, yet. I was just walking past a suit of armor when she came flying by and latched onto my head. If she thinks she can tangle with me and win, that's just too bad for her."

"Congratulations," Snape drawled lazily from behind his newspaper. "You have successfully beaten a cat. You just may be on your way to being a threat for creatures larger than a Knoll."

The cat hissed in amusement, protectively clutched by McGonagall, and Harry glared back. "Don't think this is over, demon cat," he growled warningly, but Mrs. Norris just flicked her tail at him in disdain.

Harry exited the Great Hall, plotting to get the cat once more, possibly with the recruitment of this world's Fang.

"–Collins!" Someone snapped the next day at breakfast, and he blinked out of his thoughts to face whoever was talking to him. It was Kingsley.

"Hmm?" He asked, focusing his gaze on the Auror, who looked slightly unnerved by his sudden attention.

"Dumbledore gave us the list of names you were talking about," James said, seeming to speak in general terms until the two girls left, which they shortly did, off to go speak with Lily. Harry pushed back the amazement he still had that his dad was alive, and looked at him without emotions bursting forth.

"Oh?" He said. "Was it any help?"

"Actually," James continued, his voice laced with slight humor, "We can't arrest people for no reason other than that they were Death Eaters in an alternate universe. That would never stand in court. So, do you know any ways of identifying Death Eaters?"

"Besides the obvious?" Harry asked. "Each one is different."

"And what would the 'obvious' be?" Kingsley growled, and Harry instantly knew that he hadn't made a friend there.

"The obvious being the Dark Mark on the left forearm," Harry said, resisting the urge to smirk as if Kingsley were an idiot child. Few people realized that Voldemort was hardly stupid enough to make his

followers wear a permanent tattoo, and that the Dark Mark only showed when the Death Eater was being called. He saw no reason to tell people this, as people would probably think it a mite suspicious as to how he had come across the information.

“Yes, besides that,” James Potter said, obviously hiding his amusement as well.

“Well, for the rich ones, house-elves, if you’re kind to them, will usually betray their master, though they’ll say it in a riddle-like fashion. Especially Malfoy’s house-elf.” Harry grinned at the memory of freeing Dobby.

“House-elves?” Kingsley said, looked incredulous. “You want us to question house-elves?”

“Why not?” Harry asked, and the Auror got a frustrated look on his face.

“Because their house-elves Collins! Anything they say would be disregarded in court, and anything they say wouldn’t be trustworthy anyway!”

Now both Kingsley and James Potter were looking at Harry as if he were the idiot child.

Harry felt a Hermione-level debate about to break out. “One: house-elves make marvelous witnesses if you are kind to them and don’t treat them like dirt. They’re not typically noticed, and usually hear things when nobody is paying attention to them. As for house-elves not being trustworthy,” he paused here.

“Tinny!” he called softly, and the house-elf he had seen the day before yesterday appeared right beside him.

“Tinny, may I ask you a question?” Looking slightly nervous at the three people watching her intently, she nodded.

“Have you ever lied?” Harry asked, and braced for the explosion that he knew was coming.

Last year, Ron had made a slight comment that the house-elves took as insulting their loyalty (though Ron meant no such thing, he was just walking around with his foot in his mouth) and they had instantly become knee-high demons, forcing them out of the kitchens while throwing odd bits of moldy food at Ron, much to Harry’s, and Hermione’s, albeit reluctant, amusement.

And he was right to brace himself. Tinny’s eyes flamed, and she was no longer the meek soul he had tried to calm down just a couple days ago.

“Why, Tinny has never!” The house-elf shrieked, getting everyone’s attention, as all the teachers and most of the Order members at Hogwarts were present.

“Tinny is ashamed that sir would consider such a thing! For shame!” She threw a nearby glass at him, making Harry duck. He looked up just in time to see Tinny stomp her tiny foot and disappear.

Silence rang throughout the Hall as they stared in bemusement at Collins and the house-elf that had just acted like no house-elf had ever done before.

The silence was broken, however, when the four Marauders started laughing uproariously.

“Well,” Harry said turning back around to face the two Aurors, who were looking at him, entertained. “I have never seen a single house-elf react that strongly.” Then he looked at Kingsley. “I think house-elves are quite trustworthy.”

“I believe that is a bit of an under-statement, Mr. Collins,” said a voice from behind him. The three turned to see Albus Dumbledore walking up to them, amusement evident in his twinkling eyes. “What on Earth did you ask her?”

“I asked her if she had ever lied,” Harry replied with a straight face. “Yet again not one of my smarter ideas, but I daresay it proved a point, and I’m going to go apologize as soon as she cools down.”

James looked at him with one eyebrow raised. “Why are you going to apologize to a house-elf?”

Harry scowled at him, and was intently thankful the Hermione from his world was not there. “To risk sounding cliché, house-elves have feelings, too. And I don’t want her stabbing me with a butcher knife down a dark corridor. House-elves are extremely powerful.”

He could see that he had made an impression on those two, at least, maybe more if anyone else was listening in.

“But back to the original discussion, Malfoy is the only one I really know how to catch. He keeps a lot of Dark books, potions, and artifacts in a room under the dining room floor. Not to mention,” he said with a smirk, looking at Dumbledore, “Voldemort’s diary while he was at school.” Only Kingsley flinched at the name.

James snorted at that. “Voldemort,” (Kingsley flinched again) “kept a diary? I would never have expected that!”

But Harry’s attention was on Dumbledore. “Did you figure it out yet?” He asked eagerly, enjoying knowing something that, for once, Dumbledore didn’t.

“No,” the Headmaster sighed, a cheerful look in his eyes all the same. “I daresay that I need another hint.”

“Anagrams.”

Dumbledore was instantly processing that clue through his mind. “I assume you mean that his birth name is an anagram of his name today, though I won’t ask how you figured that out.” He sat down at the table, looking in deep thought, as James looked between the two with confusion all over your face.

“What are you two doing?” He asked in a slightly annoyed tone. “Working on a riddle?”

Harry inwardly froze and started subconsciously thinking, ‘Don’t figure it out. Don’t figure it out. Don’t figure it out...’

But no, Dumbledore’s eyes gleamed with sudden comprehension when James said that, and he turned towards Harry, who hoped to anyone out there that the Headmaster couldn’t figure it out by the look on his face.

“No,” Albus said, looking at Harry with a little shock on his face, obviously reading Harry’s face pretty easily. “It is, isn’t it? Tom Riddle?”

Harry groaned and nodded. Then he punched James on the shoulder, slightly harder than necessary.

“Ouch!” James Potter yelped. “What was that for?” He asked, rubbing his arm with a mock hurt look on his face.

“You gave it away,” Harry growled. “I was planning on it taking him weeks to figure it out. But no, Potter has to come and ruin the whole thing!”

During this accusation, Dumbledore had hastily grabbed a napkin and was writing on it furiously. Kingsley directed the table’s attention to him by asking what in the world he was doing. But the old wizard just sighed mildly.

“It doesn’t work out, Mr. Collins,” Albus said. “Your hint about anagrams.”

Harry leaned over to look at Albus’s napkin. “His middle name is Marvolo and you spelled his last name wrong. Sometimes he spells it with an ‘o’, sometimes not. This is a ‘not’ time, however.”

“Ah,” Albus muttered absentmindedly while hurriedly scratching out his previous workings.

When he had it all sorted out, Albus said, "Clever. 'I am Lord Voldemort.' I would never have guessed. But how is his identity amusing?"

"You must still be half-asleep, Professor," Harry said smirking. Dumbledore looked at him questioningly. "Think about his parentage."

Harry left as soon as he finished saying that. Now that that one particular cat was out of the bag, and none left in the lake, he had other things he needed to do. He walked out of the Great Hall and into the Entrance, heading straight for the castle doors.

He never saw Moody laugh uproariously at the completely gob smacked look on Dumbledore's face that could be seen across the Hall as he stared after Harry, muttering a choice expletive in shock.

Harry quickly and silently crossed the Entrance Hall, easing one of the doors open and sliding out before anyone would notice he was missing. He was sure Moody would tail him and Harry just didn't need that right now.

Taking a deep breath, he smiled at seeing the Hogwarts grounds once more. They were the same as his dimension, right down to the Whomping Willow and Hagrid's hut.

Speaking of Hagrid, Harry wondered when he would meet his giant friend, but pushed those thoughts out of his head and started running for the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He had something he needed to do, and he saw nothing wrong with getting rid of his energy. He absentmindedly questioned how likely it was that house-elves made Hogwarts food completely out of sugar.

Holly and Lily Potter were walking around the Hogwarts greenhouse, admiring various new species that Professor Sprout had acquired.

"Wow, I thought that Orange-Bulb Vinease were too poisonous to be at a school," Holly said, surveying the plant from a distance.

“That’s why it’s at Greenhouse Four, Holly,” Lily said smirking. “Students won’t be anywhere near it.”

“Oh. Right,” Holly muttered, now slightly embarrassed. “So is Mad-Eye Moody going to teach this year?”

Her mother sighed at that question. “Yes, he is. Why Albus seems to think students will be safe around him, I’ll never know. Why, I remember your father telling me stories about the Auror Academy and one time when Moody turned someone into a thorn bush for tapping him on the shoulder.”

Holly giggled at her mum’s exasperated tone, but paused when she saw a familiar figure bolting for the Forest.

“Mum, why is Collins running towards the Forest like a bloody fool?”

“Language, Holly,” Lily said absentmindedly, following said fool with narrowed eyes. “Though I daresay we should find out. Who knows what he is up to.”

Holly nodded and the two set off for the Forest at a slower and much less noticeable pace, hoping to sneak up on Chris unawares.

They stopped when they found him by the edge of the forest and hid behind a nearby shrub, watching him with slightly curious and horrified eyes.

Harry broke a twig off a nearby tree and crudely sawed it in half with a jagged rock. Summoning his magic into a concentrated form, he slit his palm with the same rock and dripped his blood over the twig, muttering, “Ignus Magicks Lumus Magicks, Noscreas Sor!”

Harry stiffened slightly when he sensed two people coming up behind him and mentally cursed. He couldn’t stop the ritual now, especially one so Dark. Who knew what would happen? Harry briefly entertained the thought that any broken rules of magic because of him stopping it would be without the intention of getting home, but

decided that it was too risky. He could see himself trying to get through the gate of Heaven now.

“But I didn’t mean to blow up the planet, the galaxy, and subsequently create the Second Big Bang when trying to get back to my universe! It just sort of happened!”

‘Yeah,’ Harry snorted. ‘I could see St. Peter buying that one.’

So Harry continued the ritual he was doing, hoping that people wouldn’t automatically Stun him or do anything to interrupt the spell.

“Crissix loun malicis fen.”

He grimaced slightly as he felt faint waves of Dark magic emanate from the twig, but picked it up anyway.

The joys of making a temporary wand, Veionté style.

He sent a Healing Spell at his slashed palm and walked towards the hiding places of his watchers.

However, he didn’t quite get a chance to make the dignified explanation he wanted to.

“Chris Collins!” Lily said forcefully, walking out of the shrub with her wand pointed directly at him. “What are you doing using Dark Magic? You do not have even a wand in the first place!”

Harry opened his mouth, but Holly chose that moment to follow Lily and directly face Harry.

“Explain,” she said, the look on her face so similar to Lily’s that he would have laughed if he didn’t have two wands pointed at him.

Harry sighed, knowing that sarcasm wouldn’t be appreciated. “I was making a wand. I didn’t have one, and wouldn’t be able to buy one without making one, so . . .” He saw utterly confused looks on the two’s faces. “And it’s not technically Dark Magic, it’s . . . Okay, so it’s

Dark Magic, but it wasn't that bad. I can personally attest to the fact that Voldemort thinks the magic I used is below him, so it obviously isn't evil and all-destructive."

By the glaring expressions on their faces, he was just digging himself in deeper. "I'm going to just be quiet now."

Lily glared at him suspiciously, and Harry inwardly cringed. He was 17 years old and was about to be told off for the first time by his cross-universal mother who didn't even know she was his mother. 'Hmph,' Harry mentally grumbled. 'My life is a soap-opera.'

"Give me that," Lily snapped, drawing Harry back to the present.

"Um," Harry said. 'Oops.' "I can't really do that, Mrs. Potter. You see, I'm kind of paranoid." He distinctly heard Holly mutter. "Great. Another Moody. He has the scars for it, too." He scowled at Holly, "and whenever I do that spell, I make sure no one else can touch my wand."

At Lily's increasingly annoyed and disbelieving look, Harry decided that this approach obviously wasn't working. He decided to try the completely in control and powerful look.

"I apologize for any qualms you or your daughter may have against Dark Magic, but I find it to be a good resource if not used for destruction, and as I have no intention of destroying anything anytime soon, I see no problem."

Harry turned and made to stride purposefully away from them when a Petrificus Totalus shot over his shoulder. He automatically ducked and whirled around to fire a Stunner when he remembered who was behind him. That spell made him think about the last time he had been under it and he had to forcefully shove that memory out of his mind.

Keeping his face cold and emotionless, he watched his mother, who was the one who apparently tried to Body-Bind him, and was looking at him slightly startled by the speed with which he had whirled around.

"May I ask as to why it's necessary to try and jinx me?" The two winced at his icy tone, but Lily shook herself out of it. She kept her wand pointed at him threateningly. "Go. To the castle. Now," she said commandingly.

Harry could just imagine how this conversation would go. "See, I told you he was an infiltrator!" he could imagine the rat insisting. But he kept his melancholy thoughts to a minimum and sighed, walking back to the castle. Harry was inwardly depressed that Lily trusted him so little, but realized that it was a good thing that she was unwilling to trust complete strangers. He heard steps come close behind him and then saw Holly fall into step with him.

'Apparently common sense wasn't passed on to her daughter,' Harry thought as Lily breathed sharply when Holly had walked up to him.

"Why did you Dark magic?" she demanded. "Don't you know it's illegal?"

"Thank you, Holly, for that blip of erroneous information. Dark Magic is not illegal, just frowned upon, unless you're talking about the Unforgivables. Besides, don't you know better than to approach a potentially Dark wizard? I could threaten to slit your throat if I'm in a position where I can't get away. There is a war going on, Holly, you need to be more careful."

She glared at his cold and aloof manner, and stepped back to walk next to Lily. As the three walked up to the doors, Harry was absentmindedly repairing his cloak, which was torn and ragged. Realizing the need, he next put a slow-acting charm on himself, making sure he could never tell his name unwillingly, like under a truth serum, or when Confunded, and neither could anyone else. It also changed people's perception of his appearance so no one could link him to his blood family, glad that Lily Potter didn't have such a good knowledge of Charms that she would identify it as Dark. He also put a more permanent spell on his eyes to heal his eyesight. Chances were that glasses would make him be likened to James Potter, extra

charm or no. He could tell that Lily flinched every time he used a spell, so he subsided after fixing his eyes.

Dumbledore, Snape, and Moody were in the Entrance as Lily, Holly, and Harry walked in, Harry still being held at wand point.

“What’s going on?” Moody demanded in a harsh voice, also pointing his wand at Harry when he saw Lily.

“I’ve been taken hostage. Fear me,” Harry dead-panned, earning a slight snort from Snape.

“What did you do now, Collins?” The Potions professor asked lazily and Harry pretended to be irked.

“How is this possible?” He demanded to the room at large. “You all suspect me of being some evil minion of Voldemort’s, yet you honestly think I’m incompetent and don’t treat me like a threat. Life just isn’t fair.”

Snape smirked and Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled faintly, but Moody, along with the two Potters behind him, looked unconvinced.

“Why are you holding Mr. Collins at wand point, Lily?” Dumbledore asked in the same manner as if asking if she wanted tea.

“Holly and I saw him doing a Dark blood spell,” Lily said, and Albus turned towards Harry looking slightly suspicious.

“It was not a Dark blood spell,” Harry exclaimed, alarmed at how the other wizards could take Lily’s statement. “It was just a slightly Dark spell that used blood.”

Yet again, Harry had the feeling he was digging himself in deeper.

“But how were you able to use magic at all without a wand?” Moody demanded suspiciously.

Harry considered the possibility of banging his head into the stone wall. He wished Hermione was here, if just so she could explain things rationally.

“The spell I was using didn’t require a wand because I was making a wand.” Harry remembered Hermione’s utter outrage and curiosity when she had caught him trying this spell, and decided to say the same answers he had said then. “It’s only temporary, the wand can use Light spells, and no, I did not break any rules of magic, laws, or contaminate Hogwarts in any way.”

He held up the slightly crooked twig that looked quite Dark in reality, and Harry mentally winced. He should have chosen something like rosewood, but had used oak.

“Oh, and what spell did you use that is ‘apparently’ Dark, wandless, and causes no contamination?”

Harry inwardly marveled at how the Potions Professor was able to mock both him and the two Potters in one sentence before even realizing Snape was asking a question.

Blushing slightly, more for show than an actual reaction, Harry answered. “I’m not quite sure.”

Snape raised one eyebrow in sarcastic incredulity. “You use Dark Magic without knowing what kind it is? How did you manage that?”

Fidgeting mock-nervously with his new wand, Harry slightly stammered, “Well, I didn’t really learn it from a proper source . . .” At Moody’s narrowed eye he clarified. “The person who taught it to me wasn’t aware that they were potentially teaching me Dark magic.”

“And who was this genius who unknowingly put Dark magic into the hands of a fool like you?”

Not disagreeing with Snape’s assessment that he was a fool, Harry muttered under the answer under his breath. “Hermionegrangertaughtme.”

“What was that, Mr. Collins?” Dumbledore asked with twinkling eyes, showing for the first time a (in Harry’s current mind) sadistic glee in seeing people squirm. “We didn’t quite catch your answer.”

Harry glared at him, but repeated anyway.

“Hermione Granger taught me.”

“Granger?” Snape repeated with slight amusement. Harry thought that if it had been anyone else but Snape the man would have been roaring with laughter. “That goody-goody know-it-all taught you Dark Magic? That’s priceless, Collins.”

“She didn’t mean to!” Harry defended. “She was writing an extra credit essay about alternate forms of magic and left a book out. I was bored, and read it, then stole her essay and read that, too . . .”

Behind him Lily looked relieved to discover that her prize student wasn’t a soon to be Death Eater. “That sounds much more like her. But how did you get her essay? She keeps her homework under lock and key, only letting her friends read it, and you don’t seem like someone she’d be friends with.”

Harry scowled at her. So he was now an idiotic, non-threatening threat who couldn’t be friends with a bushy-haired genius? ‘Lovely.’

“She was one of my best friends, thank you very much. I am somewhat intelligent.”

Holly snorted at his comment, and Harry, smirking, pointed his wand at her and turned her hair green and silver.

“See?” He said, lifting one eyebrow. “It is capable of perfectly normal magic.”

Dumbledore had a small smile on his face, Moody had put his wand away, obviously deciding that Harry was no threat (Harry wasn’t sure

if he should feel insulted or not), and Snape was looking faintly horrified that a Potter was wearing Slytherin colors.

Holly glared at him and began to point her own wand at him when Dumbledore intervened.

“Be nice children.”

Harry grinned, but was rather miffed to be referred to as a child.

“Mr. Collins, no more jinxing Miss Potter. Miss Potter, you can get revenge on him later. But please leave the school standing, both of you. Any questions?”

Holly looked sulky but put her wand away, not willing to cross the esteemed Headmaster. Harry, however, had no such qualms, and mockingly put his hand in the air.

Albus sighed. “Yes, Mr. Collins?”

“Am I restricted to Hogwarts grounds? Because last time I just left the castle I was followed. Quite obviously, I may add.”

Both Lily and Holly blushed slightly while Snape smirked.

“If you don’t want to cause a bunch of hullabaloo at the Ministry, then you can be a ward of Hogwarts, meaning that you are in fact limited to Hogwarts grounds,” Dumbledore replied. “Any particular reason?”

“Well, this wand is only temporary, and I figured that any repeat of the spell would not be appreciated . . .”

“Ah, I see your point Mr. Collins. I believe that Severus was going to Diagon Alley today, as a matter of fact. I daresay he might be willing to let you accompany him.”

Both Moody and Snape snorted at this, and then glared at each other. After the Auror had looked away, Snape turned to Harry.

“And what am I going to get out of this exchange? I am a Slytherin, after all.”

Harry grinned. This was completely expected. “Well, I suppose I could tell you the secret to preserving any potion forever . . .” At Snape’s suddenly wide eyes and slightly eager expression, Harry took on a mockingly indecisive expression. “Perhaps not, though. After all, who knows what would happen if I told you that . . .”

“Alright, already, Collins. Your terms are accepted, though I expect you to act like a respectable member of Wizarding society.”

“Well, you see Professor, that could mean a whole range of attitude. After all, most people think that the Malfoys are the epitome of Wizard respectability. The Weasley twins were also widely respected. Not to mention —”

“Collins!” Snape snapped, though Harry could tell he was a slight bit amused. “I get your point. Keeping your idle chatter to a minimum will suffice. Merlin forbid you try to take on airs.”

At Holly’s muffled giggle, both Severus’ and Harry’s eyes sparked with the possibility of slight humiliation.

“Will Ms. 'Weasley' be joining us, Collins?” The Potions Master asked in a suave, polite tone that reminded Harry of Peeves at his worst. Holly started, and was immediately on her guard. The Potions Master of Hogwarts was up to something if he mentioned the prank.

“No, I don’t believe so, sir,” Harry responded, adopting the same manner. “I believe she has Remedial Target Practice with her sister’s pet, Professor Owl.”

Holly squeaked in mortification and turned red, causing the two to smirk in satisfaction. The miffed girl walked past Harry, punched him in the arm slightly harder than necessary to prove her point, and then stalked off talking about smart-aleck universal travelers.

Moody watched her leave with a slightly confused expression on his face. "How does she know . . .?"

Harry laughed at the dumbstruck look on Holly's (and his) mother's face.

"Don't look at me," he said. "I didn't say anything until she already knew. But she's good."

Snape made a face of utter disagreement, and then walked to the Entrance Hall door.

"If you're finished wasting time, Collins, I do have a purpose for going to Diagon Alley other than to supervise you. How do you intend on paying for a wand anyway?"

"Oh, yeah," Harry muttered distractedly, pulling out his wand and mouthing a spell that no one could hear. A bag of coins appeared in his hands and he looked up at the people watching his spell with obvious disbelief.

"Don't worry, it's not counterfeit and I have no intention of blowing up the wizarding economy."

Dumbledore had a curious look in his eyes and opened his mouth to ask the origins of the spell before Harry anticipated his question.

"I was friends with goblins in high places, but I can't tell the spell to anyone else."

With that last blip of knowledge, Harry followed Snape's path and walked out of the castle.

Harry looked around in slight dismay at the state of Diagon Alley. No longer were passing wizards friendly and talkative, but they rather rushed on about their business with an air of suspicion and haste. The shops had a slightly run-down look, and Harry could tell that being prosperous was rare. While Harry continued to examine this

world's magical London center, he followed Snape into a strange little apothecary that he had never been in before.

One step inside had him instantly intrigued.

Once the Snape of his world had stopped being so snarky and Malfoy had stopped contaminating his cauldron, Harry had discovered that he quite enjoyed Potions, brewing complex recipes so flawlessly that it occasionally frustrated Hermione so much her frizzy hair seemed to expand. ('Not flawlessly in the beginning,' Harry thought, remembering many exploding cauldrons and congealed masses that didn't look anything like the potion he tried to make.)

The shop was full to bursting with colorful collections of little-known herbs and pieces of magical creatures. While Harry's eyes immediately went to the non-magical ingredients (he enjoyed perplexing Snape and the Slytherins by proving that Muggle herbs were sometimes more powerful than magical), Snape walked up to the counter where a tall woman with beady black eyes was standing, watching her two new customers with a suspicious eye.

"Do you have my order of Orkin's feet?" Snape asked, and Harry was horrified to see the woman behind the counter drop her suspicious look and seemed to ooze over Snape.

"Of course, Mr. Snape. Only the finest for my customers, especially one as obviously talented as you are in the world of potions. If you'll step this way . . ." She moved her way smoothly from behind the counter and walked into the storeroom, winking at Snape and swaying her hips as she passed.

The Potions master shuddered with distaste and looked back at Harry, almost pleading to not be left alone with the employee, but received no support as Harry pretended to ignore him, whistling innocently with a small smirk on his face. Snape glared at the lack of support, but stopped as a voice came out of the storeroom.

"Mr. Snape, there is a lovely batch of Orkin's feet back here, and maybe a couple other things I can interest you in..."

Snape cringed but walked into the storeroom anyway, leaving Harry to look at the ingredients alone. He wondered if there were any new ingredients that had yet to be discovered in his world, but didn't immediately find anything he had not seen before. As a matter of fact, quite a few ingredients were missing. Was that just because the store was out? Or had they never been recognized as potion ingredients?

His musings were cut short when Snape came back into the main room, looking slightly harassed, but merely sneered at Harry's amused look.

The employee, Harry now guessed owner by the size of the shop, followed after the disgruntled Potions Master, laying down only one package on the counter. Harry noticed that she seemed distinctly less friendly now that Snape hadn't bought anything extra. His impression became certainty when her eyes came to rest on him. Her eyes narrowed, taking in his scruffy, scarred appearance and the lack of shopping purpose on his face before rushing over to him.

"I'm sorry sir," said the woman, seeming any but, "but these ingredients may be a little out of reach of your pocket book. Perhaps I can interest you with some other ingredients?"

Harry froze, rather irked, while Snape smirked, obviously enjoying the situation being turned around. Harry glared slightly at Snape's look, but turned back to the employee. "I believe you are correct. These ingredients are far too expensive for their level of quality. Perhaps another apothecary will suit my interests better."

The woman huffed indignantly at him, and he smirked at her condescendingly. She gave him a look of utter loathing and turned back to Snape, who had no sign of interest in the interruption. Moving stiffly, she weighed a precise amount on her silver scales and tallied the price.

"That will be 8 galleons, 3 sickles, Mr. Snape."

He gave her the money, and then took the ingredient and left, Harry right behind him. The woman's glare followed them both out onto the street until Harry shut the door firmly behind him.

"Are you missing the human gene enabling you to be civil, Collins?" Snape asked, and, to his bemusement, Harry nodded, looking like that fact didn't bother him at all.

"To sound immature," he paused to catch Snape's muttered comment about how immature he really was, "she started it. And I didn't see you being quite so civil either. She seemed quite attracted to you until you refused to buy more ingredients."

Snape glared bloody murder at him, and Harry decided to keep his mouth shut. They walked down the street past wary people who watched them suspiciously until they arrived at Ollivander's. Harry walked in but didn't immediately see anyone. As soon as the door shut, however, Ollivander immediately came forward, his silver eyes looking straight at Harry.

"Ah, Mr. Snape. Your wand was a family heirloom as it not?" the old wand-maker asked, not taking his eyes off Harry. "You never told me what ingredients were in it I believe." Seeing that Snape obviously wasn't in the mood to disclose that information, the wand maker muttered, "and it will apparently remain a secret."

Turning to Harry, Ollivander seemed to examine him. "And you must be Mr. . . ."

"Collins." Harry said. "My wand was stolen a few weeks ago, and I have given up the hunt for it, deciding to purchase a new one."

"Of course, Mr. Collins. You seem like you'll be a difficult one to place . . . However, nothing is as good as a challenge."

The wand-maker at once went to his shelves, seeming to contemplate which wand would fit best, and Harry heard Snape click his tongue impatiently. "Great, you have to be a challenge, Collins. This will take forever."

“Actually, I believe finding a wand for him will be much simpler than I first imagined.” Ollivander had apparently heard Snape’s comment, much to Harry’s amusement. “If you could follow me, Mr. Collins?”

He followed Ollivander down the musty hall of wands with not a little trepidation. The famous wand-maker had always creeped him out, and he didn’t feel any better with so many secrets. Once the two had turned a corner, Ollivander stopped and turned around.

“What was your old wand made of, Mr. Potter?”

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office, contemplating the new mystery in Hogwarts, Chris Collins. He was definitely an anomaly from what he would picture as a fighter against Voldemort, Tom Riddle. Just seventeen, the boy seemed to not trust anyone, and had unpredictable power, not to mention a rather strange sense of humor. Albus remembered the rage burning in Mr. Collins’ eyes when Severus had accused him of being a Death Eater, and how his angry magic spiraled forth, yet was obviously tightly restrained from causing destruction. The Order needed powerful people, and people of experience fighting the growing Dark force. Albus had been considering the possibility of inducting him when Chris had admitted to being only seventeen. Fighter against Riddle or not, the boy was too young. He often wondered what had made his other self place Chris in the war.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn’t hear someone approach his office until there was a knock on his door.

“Come in, Remus,” Albus called, and the werewolf opened his office door. “Would you like a lemon drop?”

“No, thank you, Albus.” Remus looked contemplative as if he had just been given the secret to curing the common cold.

“Is there anything I can assist you with?”

“Actually, Albus,” Remus started, “the other day Moody and I saw Collins come up with a possible defense against Dementors that does not involve Patroni.”

Albus leaned forward, curious, though he did not show it. If there was another defense . . .

“How did he come up with it, Remus?”

The werewolf laughed somewhat hollowly. “He was simply brainstorming. Apparently banshees hate the color blue and when Alastor challenged Collins to find another solution to something, he came up with one, dragging us to someplace called the Room of Requirement.”

Albus nodded. He had heard about that room, but never found its location. “What was the cure?”

“A Cheering Charm, though it only slows down a Dementor rather than stop it. I also don't know if the person the Cheering Charm is put on is capable of fighting the Dementor afterwards.”

‘The sheer simplicity of it is genius,’ Albus thought to himself. He could see the merits of it theoretically. ‘Essentially that would change the person into a focus of happiness instead of a Patronus. And—’

Albus straightened his half-moon glasses. “Actually, that helps things quite a bit. Can I ask your opinion of something, Remus?”

At Lupin’s curious nod he continued. “You do know that Mr. Collins is only 17 and hasn’t finished school, correct?” Another nod. “He asked to become enrolled here, and while he is a ward of Hogwarts that may be a good idea, but I really don’t think that it would be a good idea to place him as a student. From what I know and you just told me, he is more advanced than most, graduate or not.”

“Then what will happen to him, Albus? We can’t really go to the Ministry and say he appeared from another dimension.”

“Well, I was considering the possibility of making him an assistant Professor.”

Remus stared at him dumbstruck for a moment before laughing uproariously, almost falling out of his chair.

“You - you - you’re going to inflict him on the students as a Professor?” Remus had a grin on his face, a reminder of the days of Marauders, at the idea of the universal traveler teaching. “Why would you consider that option?”

“Well,” Albus began, inwardly thinking that that was not the response he was hoping for, “as you just said, he is obviously good at Defense. He will most likely annoy the Professors to death as a student, and the Ministry has been pushing for Hogwarts to start hiring Assistant Professors, so better Mr. Collins than, say, Mr. Malfoy.”

Remus nodded. “I see where you’re coming from now. Which subject would he help teach?” He looked at Albus with dawning comprehension in his eyes. “You’re not going to put him in Defense Against the Dark Arts, are you? Moody will kill him!”

Albus chuckled. “I hardly think Alastor will kill Mr. Collins, unless, of course, he starts teaching students Dark Magic, such as the variety he seems to have practical knowledge of.”

“DARK MAGIC? Collins was using Dark Magic, on top of threatening Peter a while back, and you want him teaching students?” Remus blew up at him, starting to pace around the office. “Are you insane, Albus? You want him teaching Holly and Rose, not to mention the children of Death Eaters, questionable magic?”

“Mr. Collins is not Dark, Remus,” Albus said sharply, not wanting the werewolf to be suspicious around Collins. “I, personally, am against all forms of Dark Magic, but that doesn’t mean that some can be put to good use. I don’t think we have to worry about him teaching Dark Magic to the children of Death Eaters anyway. He undoubtedly knows

who they are, and probably wouldn't even teach them so much as 'Reducto' unless directed to do so."

"Fine," Remus said, but he had a glint in his eye that promised a bone to pick with Chris Collins. "But why are you telling me? Am I supposed to tell Moody?"

Dumbledore looked up, hopeful that he himself wouldn't have to.

"Sorry, Albus, but I don't think so."

With that, the werewolf made a hasty exit, leaving Albus alone when he sighed in self-pity about the task before him.

"What was your old wand made of, Mr. Potter?"

Freezing, Harry tried to come up with a response to that, but couldn't come up with anything. 'Ollivander the All-Knowing' Harry thought sulkily before Ollivander spoke up again.

"My ancestors and I have been supplying wands for a millennia, being able to recognize any wizard's family branch, no matter how distant, no matter what charm you're using to hide your identity. And you are a Potter, not distantly either."

Harry cringed mentally. He was caught, but now what? If Ollivander told Dumbledore, then it was all over. He would be widely known as a Potter, endangering his family when he began to fight Voldemort. If he was even allowed to, with protective parents . . .

"Don't worry about me meddling. I have no reason to interfere with your decision to masquerade as Mr. Collins. I am curious, however, as to how you suddenly appear, having such a direct line to the Potter family."

His tone boded no argument, and Harry had no choice but to reply. "I'm from an alternate universe. My name is Harry Potter."

It was then that Harry hypothesized that Ollivander could have made a fortune as the world's best Occlumens. His eyes didn't even widen in shock, but nodded to himself. "Now, what was your old wand? I more than likely have the same one here."

Harry smiled at the thought of being reunited with his wand, cross-universal copy or not. "Holly with Fawkes' feather."

Ollivander immediately went to a shelf and pulled out a box that seemed no different from the others. It seemed to Harry that no one other than an Ollivander would ever inherit the store. They probably wouldn't have the ability to figure out the invisible organization system.

Ollivander opened the box and pulled out an exact copy of Harry's old wand. Grinning, Harry performed the obligatory sweep of the wand, releasing red and gold sparks.

"Curious," Ollivander murmured, and Harry's grin grew wider. "It is, isn't it?" He asked, nodding to Ollivander in acknowledgment of what he was about to say.

Ollivander gazed at him levelly. "I am now supposed to lecture you to use your wand only for good, never for evil, and to not abuse the power that comes with it. And, Mr. Collins, no matter what Albus Dumbledore or any others say, Dark magic is not always evil."

With that bit of advice, Ollivander began to make his way to the front counter, and Harry followed, completely confused. 'Wasn't Ollivander supposed to tell Dumbledore whenever this wand was chosen? And does that mean that he approves of the use of some Dark magic?'

Still bemused, Harry handed over seven Galleons for his new wand, and then followed Snape out of the shop. "Creating legitimate money yourself might be considered abusing, Mr. Collins," Ollivander called out before the door swung shut.

"What was that all about?" Snape grumbled as they wove their way to the entrance of Diagon Alley. He spoke in a disgruntled tone, but

years of being taught by the man let Harry realize that Snape was curious.

“Nothing, Ollivander just had a wand in the back that he thought would fit me—” Harry stopped what he was saying in shock. He stared at a couple walking down the street, hand in hand, one of the few groups of people laughing and smiling.

Cho Chang and Cedric Diggory.

Severus Snape was almost to the point of confusion, not that he would admit it to anyone. Chris Collins was seventeen, yes, but he had rarely seen a moment where he had acted his age, except for the quick fight with Filch's animal. Even the insult to the apothecary owner had a biting and sophisticated edge, unnervingly like Lucius Malfoy, though his Slytherin intelligence told him it would not be wise to point out the similarities out loud.

Then there was the moment of Ollivander's when the wand-maker seemed to recognize Collins and know him. Snape had heard about his singular ability to recognize a witch or wizard from any magical family, but Collins was a Muggleborn, something no one would admit to if it weren't true. Snape didn't even know what wand Collins now had, which would definitely say something about the boy's power or strengths.

Snape was trying to find out why Ollivander seemed so interested in Collins when he heard him stop. Turning around, Severus saw him standing stock-still, staring at something that made Collins' face lose any sign of blood. Wondering what shocked Collins, who was nearly as emotionless as him when necessary, Severus looked in the direction Collins' haunted eyes were pointed at, and only saw a mindless, giggling couple.

“What is it, Collins? That's only Chang and Diggory.”

“I know,” he replied in a shaky voice that startled Snape more than anything else. The boy looked like he had just seen a ghost, but then seemed to shake out of it.

“It’s nothing,” Collins said, once again with his emotionless voice, giving no sign that he had been frozen with shock a second earlier. They walked on in silence, Collins only looking back at the couple once before marching forward determinedly. Severus continued to mull things over in his head. Perhaps Collins really had seen the closest equivalent to a ghost possible without being literal. Did Chang and Diggory die in his world? But if they were at war there, death wouldn’t be so unusual and shouldn’t have affected him so much, especially since neither were in his year.

Severus sighed. The mystery of Chris Collins seemed never-ending. Once you were confused with one event, more kept piling on. The two walked into the Leaky Cauldron and into a very loud and aggressive debate.

“The government isn’t doing anything about the threat of You-Know-Who!” one man was saying, apparently a spokesman for the other people sitting at his table, nodding their agreement. “Everyday more people die because we try to stand up to him, but Crouch and the Ministry refuse to help us accomplish anything! Our only choices are to continue being massacred or ask what demands You-Know-Who has. He has to have a purpose and maybe we can compromise.”

Harry and Severus both snorted in disbelief at the same time, but they weren’t heard over the next side of the debate.

“That’s ridiculous, Phil,” a witch yelled back. “You want to bow down to the maniac? You want to waste what all those people who died stood up for? The Ministry is doing the best they can, with a threat that is extremely powerful. If you’re worried about yourself, than move out of the country, but I believe the Ministry, and Dumbledore, will stop You-Know-Who soon!”

Harry shook his head. That argument was better, but it still made little sense to depend entirely on the government to solve your problem. He decided to step in.

“I have an idea,” he said, and the other people in the Leaky Cauldron turned to look at the scarred, unknown arrival with the brooding tone. “Why don’t you defend yourselves, teach your families spells to defend themselves, stop depending on the government to solve your problem for you,” here he looked at the woman who spoke up, who looked slightly embarrassed, “because they obviously aren’t. I wouldn’t suggest trying to compromise with the megalomaniac either,” this glancing at ‘Phil’, “because the only thing Voldemort,” gasps rang out here, and Harry rolled his eyes, “wants is to put the purebloods into power and kill everyone else.”

The bar was in total silence when he finished, with them all watching him warily.

“And how does someone as young as yourself knows so much about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?” asked a gruff voice from the back.

“He and I are on speaking terms,” Harry replied with a grim smirk. “Well, not so much speaking terms as much as we try to curse each other whenever possible. And stop with the code names. He wants you to fear his name, so stop helping him! Call him Voldemort - don’t gasp!” He said, before anyone could do so, “or Tom, if you’re in a particularly annoyed mood. Oh, and I wouldn’t suggest planning out a strategy in the middle of a public place where anyone could overhear.”

Snape rolled his eyes and sighed in annoyance for the duration of this speech, ridiculing the Gryffindor fashion of it, but had to admit that it quickly took effect. As the two of them headed for the fireplace they heard muttered conversations and a couple shakily whispered “Voldemort” in the middle of them.

Harry took some Floo powder to go to the Three Broomsticks, the closest spot to Hogwarts. The fireplace seemed to spit him out and he flew a good four feet before hitting the floor, soot-covered and cursing. He turned to see Snape looking at him impassively.

“Ah, so Mr. Collins can make speeches but can’t travel in a fireplace?” Snape asked in his customary smirk, causing Harry to consider cursing him instead of the fireplace. Instead he just told Snape to shut it.

“Was that really necessary, Collins?” Snape asked curiously, and Harry knew he was talking about the Leaky Cauldron, not his choice of curses.

“Voldemort is my soap-box,” he replied, but the strange look the Potions Master gave him said that he had never heard that Muggle expression before. “It means I could debate about how to fight him for hours.”

Snape shook his head at Harry’s idiocy, and then leveled a glare at him. “I believe you owe me some information now, Collins,” he said.

Harry rolled his eyes and walked outside before answering. Hogwarts was dimly lit and a few silhouettes were visible even from Hogsmeade.

“Paprika.”

“Excuse me?” Severus responded in a tone that exuded skepticism.

“Paprika. The secret to eternal potions.”

Snape sputtered indignantly. “Are you telling me that the long-sought secret of preserving potions is a Muggle spice?”

“Yes, I am. It works on everything, too. I wouldn’t expect it to work in Veritaserum or Wolfsbane Potion, but it does. I think it has something to do with the level of spice in paprika pepper that burn the potion into a level of stasis, but honestly I have no idea.”

Severus just shook his head in disbelief. Muggles spices in magical potions. Who knew what unorthodox cure Collins would barter with next.

“Collins, this world that you came from. Wizards were normal humans, with arms and hands, correct?”

“Ha ha. Very funny. Stop being so bitter just because you didn’t think of it first.”

Harry ignored Snape the rest of the walk up to the castle, fixated on his new wand, wandlessly casting protection charms on it: Anti-Summoning, Unbreakable, anything he could think of so it would never be stolen again.

Once inside the Entrance Hall, the two split up, Severus heading towards the dungeons, muttering about Paprika and Orkin’s feet. Harry was going up the staircase, running up two steps at a time, feeling lighter than he had in a month when a hand stretched out and yanked him into a corridor parallel the staircase. He instantly flipped the hand’s owner sideways, but the force caused both him and the unknown person to slam into opposite walls.

“Mmph,” Harry said quietly. “That didn’t go quite as smoothly as it was supposed to.” While muttering to himself, he looked around and saw Remus standing up, also muttering, nursing a new bruise on his jaw.

“Mr. Lupin,” Harry began icily – ‘What in the WORLD was Remus doing?’ — “Can I ask why it was necessary to snatch me off the staircase?”

Remus glared back, but answered him in a question. “Is it true that you use Dark Magic?”

Harry nearly groaned, while keeping his emotions in check. He knew that Remus would be suspicious of him again, let alone Moody when he found out. But wasn’t Remus, of all people, supposed to know that Dark isn’t always evil?

“Yes.”

The werewolf growled at Collins' seemingly careless attitude about the less liked genre of magic. "If you're so comfortable using Dark Arts, I want you to stay the Hell away from Holly and Rose."

Harry gasped in shock and dismay. Stay away from the two friends he had made here? ('Snape doesn't count,' Harry thought firmly. 'It's a force of habit to put up with him.') His sisters, even if they didn't know they were related? Harry searched Lupin's face for a reason, and he saw it. To keep the Potter sisters safe. He couldn't argue with that frame of mind, and wasn't that what he wanted anyway? To stay away from his family so Voldemort would have no extra motivation for killing them? Harry mentally sighed. Yes, that was what he planned, but he didn't expect it to be so painful.

"Very well," Harry said, trying not to show that it wasn't very well at all. "If that is for the best."

Harry walked off, and for an instant Remus felt a flash of indecision as Collins' face showed nothing, not even defiance, but also walked off, thankful that the new anomaly of Hogwarts wouldn't be near his two "nieces".

Unknown to either, a cat with spectacle shaped markings watched the scene with narrow eyes. The feline padded softly around the corner in the direction Chris Collins had turned, just in time to see the person in question punch the wall in frustration, loss but determination etched onto his face.

Snape walked into his quarters, sighing with relief at the information he had just found out. The Dark Lord had constantly been after the secret to making potions that stayed good forever. His hunt for the secret was by no means hidden. Dumbledore had known before Severus even told him, and now he would be able to tell Voldemort the way.

Of course, he would test this information first, just to make sure Collins wasn't setting him up. Grimacing about having the Dark Lord wield the power of ever-lasting potions, he was fully prepared to let Dumbledore know as well.

He just completed a simple Wart-Removing Potion to test the paprika when his arm burned, and, abandoning the potion, Snape grabbed his mask and cloak and whisked away into his fireplace, going to meet the most feared wizard of the magical world.

Patricia Williams sat curled in a small defensive ball in a corner of Voldemort's feared dungeons. She had been there only for a couple days, but knew with certainty that she couldn't stand being there anymore. Whimpering at a small noise, she closed her eyes and turned her thoughts to her boyfriend, her one reason that she had stayed alive this long and had hoped to escape.

She had first seen the man about a year ago, sitting alone and dismal at a small table in her cafe. He had seemed broken, like he had just lost everything that he held dear.

Her own heart was cracked and bleeding from recently losing her brother to a scuffle with Death Eaters. A scuffle, she still thought with anger, not even a concentrated attack. And seeing someone mirror her own feelings made her sit next to him on her break and start talking to him.

She smiled in remembrance. He had no desire to talk, not at the beginning. But by needling him and constantly chattering about unimportant things, he had opened up, and Patricia had found a friend, even one so obviously lost. One thing had led to another, until he had greeted her every morning with a fresh rose that she wore everyday, and he kissed her goodbye on his way to work at a close Quidditch store.

A Quidditch store! She had originally wondered, but as she healed him, he had turned into a mischievous, fun-loving man, who hated closed in spaces and took her daily for walks in the nearby woods.

He was about to propose to her, she was sure, before she had been kidnapped by the loathsome Death Eaters, and carted away into this mangy cell. Tears filled her eyes as she hoped he wouldn't become broken again, because she now knew that she wouldn't escape. No one escaped. They just stayed down here until they died or another jail cell was needed for a new prisoner.

She wiped her eyes and called her love by his pet name, that she alone called him. 'I'm so sorry, Snuffles.'

Chapter 8: Insanity? Naw... Couldn't Be!

...the writings of this humble writer's work and diligence...

'Humble, my orange and yellow striped sock!'

...with succinct and brief explanations of the most devious and dark rituals known to wizarding kind, of which are rarely tried even by the most evil and cursed users of Dark magic, and have an even smaller percentage of successful accounts. In this short introductory, you, as the reader, will receive a basic understanding of the Rituals of the 15th century, most commonly known as the Basilisk Age...

'Short? Succinct? Brief? Oh, well then, there goes my other sock! Wait, wait, ah, here we are!'

'The Crosfinctinous Ritual, also called Ritual of Death Escaped, is a little-known ritual to achieve immortality. The witch or wizard trying this ritual must have no reservation about the magic needed to perform such an act, and must possess no qualms against human sacrifice or the damaging of one's own soul. The Crosfinctinous Ritual traditionally takes place on the fifth day after the full moon, as the day is divisible by the twelve-divided year. A sacrifice of the life force of three relatives is necessary to begin the spell, after which the soul of the witch or wizard is irreparably damaged and to stop the ritual will result in a painful death...

'...After the Ritual of Death Escaped is completed, the immortal wizard will always feel a certain tug towards the location the spell took place at, and will commonly live near or at the spot. This is usually near the place of death of the three sacrificed relatives. Often, following the trend of British governmental rebellion history, this location will in fact be the headquarters of whatever operation the now immortal being is trying to accomplish...'

Knock, knock, knock!

Albus started as someone banged loudly on his door and blinked his eyes to try and refocus them after reading the book for so long. A feeling of foreboding filled him as he realized what he had just read.

This was almost certainly the ritual Voldemort, Tom Riddle, the Headmaster reminded himself with a frown, had achieved his immortality with, if this book was any reference worth trusting. His frown deepened. The book had not mentioned a way to break the ritual or kill the one with immortality. In fact, it had specifically mentioned that such a feat was impossible.

He buried his face in his hands, while considering the merits of banging his head against his desk. If Voldemort had indeed used this ritual, then that was it. The Order of the Phoenix couldn't do anything other than try to deplete the forces of the Death Eaters or start moving all Muggleborns underground.

That was one upside at least. The paranoid Dark wizard would never allow any of his followers to become immortal, suspicious of a coup. That wasn't much of a consolation prize, but--

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

"Oh, what?" Albus muttered, shaken out of his circle of thoughts. He cleared his throat and shuffled a stack of parchment on top of the still open book. "Come in," he called, straightening his half moon glasses.

Moody banged through the door, an almighty scowl on his scarred face and his wand already in his hand.

'Oh dear,' Dumbledore thought, torn between amusement and apprehension. 'This isn't going to be pleasant.'

"Albus!" Moody thundered. "What have you done now?"

"Done, Alastor? You'll excuse my old age but you'll have to be more specific," Dumbledore said cautiously, fully prepared to dive under his desk.

"You know very well what, and I want to know what it is! Lupin comes up to with a huge grin on his face and says you have something to tell me, and you try to avoid it? I don't think so! Now, what infernal plan have you cooked up now?"

"Yes, well, I'll certainly be having words with young Mr. Lupin," Albus muttered threateningly, and Moody apparently overheard him.

"Yes, Albus? And no, I don't want one of your lemon drops." Mad-Eye cut him off before Dumbledore could even ask, and the old wizard went straight to business.

"Are you teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts again this year?"

"Yes, no ruddy curse is getting in the way, especially since I refuse to work with Crouch. Why?" Moody narrowed his eye in suspicion. He knew something was up.

"Barty has been pushing for the institution of assistant professors for quite some time now, as you already know. This is not the best time to have extra untrained staff running around the castle, but the Ministry's support is vital to the continued existence of the Order..."

"Get to the point already! You sound like one of those dusty old books always running around the castle."

Albus wondered how the exAuror had known about the strange mutated books with legs, but let it pass.

"I was wondering if you would be interested in having an Assistant Professor this year," Albus stated hesitantly, even though he tried to instill a bit of authority into it.

"Depends on who it is," Moody growled. He had a good idea where this was going, and he wasn't happy about it.

Albus appeared to not notice Moody's unwillingness. "Mr. Collins. Too many questions would be asked if he were to turn up as a student, but as an Assistant, the Ministry won't look into his record."

"Albus, why not Snape and his Potions class?" Alastor said, almost whining, something the old exAuror would later deny. "If I have to put up with Collins in classes, with him teaching students potentially Dark

magic, then I'm probably going to end up killing him one of these days."

Albus just looked amused during the duration of Moody's rant, something that the ranter in question didn't take kindly to.

"For Circe's sake! He's seventeen, I doubt if he even knows how to hold a wand properly! He's snide, sarcastic, uses Dark Magic, and I don't trust him influencing the students!" There was a slight pause in the speech, and Moody sighed. "You're going to make me, aren't you, Albus?"

Albus smiled benignly. "You know I would never force you to do anything, Alastor, I—"

"—would just cajole, trick, and nag until I accept it." The exAuror looked about ready to give in, but then his eyes narrowed as he realized what accepting this would mean. He didn't like Collins, didn't trust him, and would not, under any circumstances, work with him.

Mad-Eye glared at him with a narrowed brown eye, and even his magical blue eye stayed centered on the old wizard. Dumbledore was beginning to feel a trifle nervous when Moody finally spoke.

"You have five seconds to either laugh and say you're practicing for April Fool's Day, or run away as fast as you can."

Albus lifted one eyebrow. Surely his friend wasn't serious? This was Dumbledore's office, after all. He wasn't just going to be chased away by someone 30 or 40 years younger than himself. Besides, Alastor had just looked about ready to accept...

"Four."

"Come now, Alastor. You're being a bit extreme. After all, Mr. Collins does have practical and theoretical knowledge of dark creatures and spells--"

"I don't care, I just don't like him. Three."

"That's hardly professional. It's a much better option than having him be a seventh year. Would you really want to teach him? Besides, he will no doubt be a help to this war, and the experience he could offer to young students who would listen to him--"

"Two."

Albus kept his silence, challenging Moody to bring wands into the argument.

"One."

From a golden perch on the other side of the room, a phoenix watched the conversation in uninterest before tucking his head under his wing and trying to sleep. This was different from the usually inactive portraits that hung throughout the office, who were making nostalgic remarks of 'how they too once had to deal with insubordinate teachers' or 'in my day, that excuse for a professor would have been hanging from his thumbs in the dungeons by now!' and making small bets with spare coins from their era.

As the argument heightened in intensity and volume, the fiery bird creaked open his eyes and glared at the foolish wizards who risked the phoenix's wrath. As they proceeded to ignore his warning chirps, Fawkes trilled in annoyance and ruffled his feathers while preparing a plan of action, trying to decide whether to help his companion make an escape or just burn the lot of them, harrumphing portraits as well. Feeling the irritation rolling off the Darkness Hunter and nervousness coming off his companion, Fawkes came to a decision and took the matter into his own claws. Landing on Dumbledore's shoulder and making them both disappear in a flash of flame as Moody blew his stack.

"If I have to do this!" Moody roared to the now-empty office. "I'm challenging him to a duel first to see how incompetent he is!"

There was no answer, and Moody stomped out of the office, halfway wondering if he should have accepted that transfer to Peru a long time ago.

(OOoOO)

Four sets of eager eyes watched a particular section of the main moving staircase, waiting patiently, or impatiently for two of them, for someone to appear.

Footsteps were heard coming nearer to their location, clipped steps that clicked closer and closer. The eight eyes widened in anticipation, but stifled sighs as the footsteps turned and faded in the distance.

So they still watched, waiting for someone in particular to come near.

"Oh, come on!" James groaned impatiently. "Why isn't anyone coming?"

"I told you that we should have done the third floor, Prongs," Sirius commented, though in the same bored tone. "But no, you thought the fourth floor would be better.

"Shut it," Remus suddenly snapped. "Someone's coming." The werewolf paused and sniffed the air. "It's Collins."

"About time," James whispered, but quieted at a glare from Remus and an elbow from Peter.

They watched in antsy glee as Chris walked down the corridor and nearer to their closet-hiding spot just a bit away from the bottom of the flight of stairs.

All four sucked in a breath as the seventeen-year-old paused suspiciously, as if someone had just walked over his grave in warning of the prank he was about to fall into. Remus suddenly remembered that Collins's Animagus was a werewolf and wondered if he could smell them, but thought it unlikely. Especially as the victim began to move once more towards the staircase.

Harry, on alert ever since the calculating Sirius had given him a look a couple nights ago, knew that the Marauders would try to prank him sooner or later. Because of this, he had cast a barely legal spell on

himself to see magic that Hogwarts had not initially accepted, meaning anything not cast by the Founders or the current Headmaster.

So he was hardly surprised to see a particular stair covered in all manners of horribly humiliating or similarly uncomfortable spells. Hiding a smirk, he paused just to annoy the Marauders, who were most likely in the closet covered in silencing and one-way see-through charms, then continued normally on his way.

Harry walked straight towards the cursed step, taking each previous one once at a time, before dramatically leaping over the jinxed stair and continuing to walk to the third floor. Once he had reached the closet door, Harry sniffed the air and caught the scent of the four pranksters. Wordlessly casting a lock charm that could only be cancelled from the outside, he ignored the muffled poundings coming from the other side. Sticking his wand under the crack of the door, he cast enough painting and furniture charms to make the inside resemble an eclectic old woman's fussy, frilly living room, cast a long-lasting properly termed 'elevator music' charm, and turned the door clear on either side.

Grinning and waving at the raging Marauders, who were pointing furiously at the door knob and making exaggeratedly horrified faces at the music, Harry conjured a sign to hang on the door knob that politely read, 'Please do not feed the animals.'

Smiling evilly, Harry cast the opposite of a repulsion charm, an attracting charm, on the door so everyone would feel the urge to walk past the door. He enunciated the words and clearly made the wand movements so the Marauders would know exactly what he was doing.

Saluting them once, Harry pocketed his wand and left, feeling extremely proud of his day's work, soon passing by a curious Potions Master who felt some strange urge to go the long way to the Headmaster's office.

Harry continued on his way, still having a grin on his face. 'If that was the best the Marauders could do,' Harry thought challengingly, 'then everyone's been lying about their pranking skills.'

Nodding his head towards the Fat Friar, who nodded back and started whispering conspiratorially to the ghost with rustling skirts at his side, Harry walked up to a large portrait of a bowl of fruit. He reached up to tickle a pear, then grasped the newly formed handle and walked into the domain of the house-elves.

House-elves in Hogwarts uniform bustled about, making occasional high-pitched comments or sounds of approval. The rows of magical and miscellaneous stoves across the wall were sparkling clean and a couple were steaming and buzzing with the energy of culinary spells.

Looking away from the magical hubbub that always entranced him, Harry turned towards the nearest house-elf, who had pale blue, almost purple eyes and his cap set at a rather jaunty angle instead of the precise angle the others were at.

"Excuse me, but I'm looking for a house-elf named Tinny, if you know where she would be..."

The house-elf looked at Harry speculatively, seeming to think about the result of him complying, weighing the pros and cons.

"Yes, sir," the house-elf soon decided. "I is Vert, and Tinny is my sister. I will get her."

The house-elf gave him a warning glance before popping away, ignoring Harry's look of surprise as he realized that another house-elf other than Dobby seemed to be the odd one out of the species.

The house-elves all walking around seemed to ignore him, as if knowing that Vert was already helping him. This struck Harry as odd, because in his past experience the tiny creatures nearly stampeded to help whoever entered the kitchens.

He was currently musing about why this was happening when a smaller than normal house-elf popped beside him, and looked at him with childish curiosity. Harry realized that the house-elf was indeed a child, if his less-professional uniform was anything to go by.

"What is wrong with your magic, Chris Collins, sir?" He asked and Harry looked at him oddly.

"There wasn't anything wrong with my magic last time I checked... Why, do you see something wrong with it?"

The young house-elf seemed astonished to be asked his opinion, but stepped up to the plate anyway. "Not wrong, really, Chris Collins, but a little off. Is you foreign?"

Harry pondered the answer to that question. "Yes, I suppose I am, and that would probably explain why my magic would seem a little strange. Thank you, though."

He nodded, but squeaked as a loud pop signified the arrival of another house-elf.

"Poppin!" Tinny exclaimed with amusement, and Poppin shifted his weight guiltily. "Aren't you supposed to be helping Ester?"

"Yes, Missus Tinny," Poppin said softly, before bowing to Harry and popping away.

Upon seeing Harry, her face showed a spark of anger but she bowed low. "How can I help Master Collins?"

He knelt down to be her height. "I would like to apologize, Tinny."

She gasped, as did the many other house-elves in the kitchen, who now seemed to notice him after he had been specifically addressed.

"For what, sir? Sir did nothing . . ." Tinny said, but Harry could tell that her response was automatic, that he was not her favorite person by any stretch of the imagination.

"But I did, Tinny. I'm very sorry for questioning your loyalty. I did not mean it at all how I said. Can you give me a chance to explain myself?"

He could see the small house-elf's thoughts written plainly across her face. She didn't think that there was any explanation for the insult, but was required by bond to forgive him if he so ordered it, which he had no intention of doing. She was also moved that a wizard would bother to apologize to her, especially so sincerely. She nodded.

"I was trying to prove a point to Aurors Potter and Shacklebolt," Harry began. "We were talking about possible witnesses against Death Eaters, and I suggested that house-elves should be given the chance to speak on stand."

Tinny nodded, following along, and Harry could see the house-elves behind her listening intently.

"They thought that house-elves should not be allowed as witnesses, but I argued back that house-elves would never lie. They weren't inclined to believe me, so I summoned you to prove that house-elves find the very idea of lying repulsive."

Tinny nodded again, a small smile of understanding on her face.

"Sir had good intentions, but didn't go about them very well."

Harry chuckled. "No, no I didn't. I have an unfortunate habit of not thinking. So, do you forgive me?"

"Yes," Tinny said simply, and Harry smiled.

"Thank you."

"But Tinny should warn sir," she began with a grin, "that house-elves do control the food in Hogwarts. As sir said, we is very powerful."

Some of the house-elves seemed taken aback by her mischievous threat, but Harry put his hands in the air in an exaggerated non-threatening gesture.

"Now that I have been thoroughly put in my place, I should leave," Harry said standing and walking back over to the portrait. "I have no doubt you'll need to threaten me again some day soon, Tinny."

Tinny smirked, showing more deviousness than Harry had ever seen in a house-elf. "Tinny has no doubt either, Master Collins."

"I would rather you call me Chris, Tinny."

"Yes, Master Chris," she replied with a grin, and with a snap of her fingers Harry found himself outside the portrait of the fruit, shaking his head.

"Never imagined meeting a house-elf so mischievous," he muttered to himself. "Hermione would no doubt approve."

He wandered aimlessly down hallways he hadn't been through but had seen the entrances of on various escapades, thinking about the Hermione and others he knew. He wondered what was going on in his universe: was Voldemort still angry beyond belief, or if the Order was searching for him. He hoped that someone would realize what had happened to him, and make sure Hermione and the Weasleys didn't worry too much.

Hearing voices up in front of him, he melted into the shadows near the Great Hall doors, falling into his perpetual habit of snooping.

(OOoOO)

A small crown of red hair was visible through a rather large mountain of tomes. While perfecting her syllabus, Lily Potter had inadvertently built a small impenetrable fortress around her, shielding her from sight or interruption.

Grumbling under her breath about how third years never paid attention to proper shielding and bemoaning having to teach a solid four weeks without positive input, she marked down the reference texts needed to plan her lessons in greater depth.

She scratched her nose with a lurid purple quill, courtesy of her oldest daughter who had wisely bought a selection of quills that were tamper-- or prank--proof. Tapping the side of her parchment, Lily looked over what she had written so far.

The book *The Way of the Wand and the Shield of the Stone* by Chrissy Crossword was her selected text for all her students to purchase. It had the double purpose of instructing wards, defensive spells and enchanted objects, as well as having a fairly advanced vocabulary. She shuddered in remembrance at the appalling spelling on all the essays she had had to grade.

The quote "And now the fenix fethers r at a state of hi flammabillitie," would stay with her forever.

She scratched a couple more lines before throwing down the quill in frustration and slammed her currently open reference shut. A feeling of frustration pounded in her head as she thought about what was currently disturbing her thoughts.

An uneasy, restless feeling had persecuted her for the last couple days, making her feel edgy for no apparent reason. She had even snapped at Holly just earlier today for having to hunt down her alarm clock that had fallen behind a bookcase!

But the feeling wasn't quite anger, though that was how it came up. It was something intangible, a wisp of a feeling that ebbed and flowed, making the redhead feel as if she could almost grab at it at some points. At other times it merely buzzed just out of reach, like an opportunity that she hadn't noticed in time to take advantage of.

No one else seemed to feel this way, though, so Lily merely ignored it when possible and avoided what might annoy her when she couldn't.

Of course, that was only one of the strange feelings she had gotten. Being a Muggleborn, it was practically impossible for her to have any kind of Seer blood (and she was grateful for that whenever she saw Sybil Trelawney making her lackadaisical way to and fro in the castle throughout the year), but at the same time she had always felt little odd senses, like she had a strange flickering of sixth sense, or ESP, every so often.

Now that she really thought about it, her mother and grandmother had been the same way. Her mother, for instance, had taken one

glance at her about eighteen years ago, and known that she was pregnant. The same thing happened two years afterward with Holly, and later on with Rose.

Her grandmother, Lily remembered fondly, was a short-tempered, cynical woman who had scoffed at Lily's tales of woe about the Marauders plaguing her early years at Hogwarts.

"Bah!" the old woman had exclaimed, as Lily complained about constant animals in her bed and the annoying mob of gerbils that had followed her for three days. "You'll learn to love him anyway."

Lily crinkled her nose in humor at remembering her horrified reaction and increased sense of revenge for whatever the bespectacled Marauder did to her, refusing his later attempts at dates with her grandmother's comment echoing in her ears.

But all that was reason to believe that she, in fact, did have a bit of a Seer touch in her, because, whenever she was near Collins, she had felt an immediate sense of outlandishness. To her, at least, his... Lily decided 'aura' was the best word to use, aura was slightly different from everyone else's, proof that Chris Collins did in fact come from a different universe.

This peculiarity, coupled with Lily's irritated sense of something missed, led her to think maybe Chris Collins was key. It was like he was part of whatever opportunity that was causing her to feel like something she had been missing was suddenly returned, like a long-lost book of a forgotten title or some acquaintance, that, had she known him, her life would have been better.

Harrumphing at her foolishness, Lily shook her head and returned to her syllabus.

She had more important things to do than figure out feelings that weren't real.

Her return was interrupted by a beeping and the sudden appearance of a parchment message before her:

All Staff of Hogwarts,

The Ministry has decided to take a tour of Hogwarts later today. It is advisable (not to mention mandatory) for classrooms to be set and a general syllabus to be created. The Minister and five others will be coming, so it is also advisable that our best manners are used, especially if you are a guest at this school and are otherwise employed at the Ministry...

A.D.

'That was brief and to the point,' Lily thought in amusement at the obvious hint to the Marauders, and probably Collins, as well. Sighing in irritation, though, at the Ministry, she hurried through her syllabus preparations. Maybe just a general one was needed, but she would show those chauvinistic purebloods in charge that she was perfectly capable of doing more.

(OOoOO)

Albus Dumbledore, not knowing the havoc going on around the fourth floor staircase, was currently gathering the courage to go back to his office. His old friend had probably hexed the place thoroughly before going to confront Mr. Collins. The old wizard chuckled at the thought, not taking pity as he usually would have done for the poor wizard who had annoyed Mad-Eye Moody.

Currently electing to walk towards the Hogwarts Library rather than brave going back, a place he very rarely visited, and he cast an annoyed glance at his trilling familiar who had chosen to perch on his shoulder.

"This is all your fault, I hope you know," Dumbledore grouched. "For the first time a headmaster has been kicked out of his office, by his own familiar!"

Fawkes chirped in a way to tell him to stop being so silly, but Albus just crossed his arm and tried to ignore the phoenix, which was difficult, as the bird had at that moment decided he had had enough and caught the Headmaster's beard on fire.

Instead of panicking, Dumbledore merely cast a (often used) Dousing Charm and narrowed his eyes at the amused creature. "I was reading that book, you know, you could have at least brought that along, as well."

He got no response other than a cackle-like burst of song.

"I'm serious, Fawkes," Dumbledore continued, talking frankly to the immortal bird as he had done to few others before. "There is no known way to reverse that ritual. Voldemort truly is immortal. The only vulnerability he had was that prophecy, but both children mentioned were gone, one killed and the other lost to the pain of his own mind."

Fawkes looked at him with bright, serious eyes, and, feeling his companion's depression that had come from knowing Dumbledore a long time, knew that the Headmaster had very little hope left. The bird opened his beak and sang a long note that steadily grew in volume, as if "Just think about it!"

Dumbledore took his familiar's advice, but no solution came to mind. "I just don't know, Fawkes. There's no solution I can think of, so unless there is some way to just completely remove Voldemort's magic, or put him in a magical coma, or," Albus let his rather vindictive side out, "run him over with the Knight Bus..."

Fawkes rolled his eyes in irritation. To the bird, the solution was fairly obvious, but it wasn't his place to meddle too far into wizard affairs. Twittering and landing on his companion's shoulder, Fawkes wondered why no one had realized that Chris Collins was born at the end of July.

Or better yet, that his real name wasn't Chris Collins.

Dumbledore stayed lost in his thoughts until he felt a foreign magic pulling at him, directing him to go a certain direction. Seeing no harm in following the magic's beckon, Albus turned and began walking up a flight of stairs rather out of his path.

The old wizard peered at the corridor curiously, looking for the reason he was brought here. A couple steps later he was facing a small group of people laughing and pointing at a broom closet door.

Prominent in the group were two adult (though this was much debated) redheads, doing most of the cheering and joking that caused laughter to ripple through the group.

Taking advantage of his height to peer into the source of amusement, Dumbledore saw the inside of a small broom closet, including the four steaming Marauders currently locked inside with fussy pink furniture and antique clutter. Chuckling at the four's plight, Albus turned to Gideon and Fabian Prewitt.

"I assume that you two are the ones behind this?" He asked genially, but hid his surprise when the two shook their heads.

"Nope, it was Furgeson," Fabian answered in a tone of pride.

At Dumbledore's questioning look, Gideon elaborated. "Collins."

"Ah," Dumbledore responded, looking at the four glum Marauders.

Once the troublemakers had spotted the Headmaster, they immediately started making signaling motions for him to open the door, but Albus just chuckled and waved at them, snickering at one of their few failures up to date.

Not taking no for an answer, Remus and Peter glared at the Headmaster, their expressions getting stormier and stormier in direct contrast to everyone else's glee. Sighing in defeat, Dumbledore pulled out his wand and cast canceling charms on the door.

The Marauders barreled out at once, unwilling to take the chance that the old wizard would put the charms back on again.

"That's it!" James yelled in challenge. "Collins is going to get it!"

Snape, one of the many watching their former plight, sneered at his remark. "Obviously that plan has gone on so well, Potter. I'm unable to imagine what overwhelming victory you'll have next."

"Shut it, Snivellus," all four snapped before stalking off with the remains of their dignity.

This was difficult, as snickers and catcalls from the two Prewitts followed after them.

(OOoOO)

Harry waited in the shadows for the owners of the voices to pass by. He was fairly deep in the bowels of the castle, and, while it still had the marble ceilings and walls of the passageway to the kitchens, the place had a distinctly dreary look. Even the portraits were of scowling, grubby looking people who had an aura of malcontent, and as Harry looked at their faces a chill shivered up his spine.

Now that he was hidden near a pillar, Harry realized that the shadow wasn't nearly as deep as he had thought it to be, and he stepped back further, hoping that no one would see the movement.

His foot crunched loudly on something, and Harry winced, pausing as he waited for a group of angry would-be eavesdroppees to swoop around the corner. After no one had appeared, Harry looked down and saw the cracked remains of what had just been an old rat skeleton.

Quickly scuffing away the bones, he put his foot down softly and moved his left foot, only to step on yet another small skeleton.

Harry paused again, but this time with a creeping feeling like something was closing in on him. He lit his wand to offset the dim light, Harry looking around him in dawning horror.

He had walked into a near carpet of skeletons of small animals, some nearly piles of dust with age, others with half-rotted flesh hanging off their tiny bones. Harry shivered and listened for the voices he had

heard, but they weren't there anymore. Trying to avert his eyes from the ground, he looked up and almost yelped in surprise.

The portraits were all looking straight at him, their faces pressed up against the front of the portraits as if trying to get to him. Their leering faces and empty eyes stared deep into his own brilliant green ones, and they all hissed at him as if trying to speak Parseltongue to him.

Getting no meaning from their haunting hisses, Harry walked forward into the sea of bones to investigate and, cursing his Gryffindor tendencies, turned right and headed down a completely unlighted corridor. His werewolf form had given him the slight ability to see in the dark, and Harry snuffed out his wand so as not to attract anyone's ('or anything's' his mind shot warningly) attention besides the heavy crunching of his feet that he could do nothing about.

His vague suspicions were confirmed when he saw the emerald filled engraving of a snake up ahead, its jewel eyes glittering without a source of light.

They were just like those of the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry hastened towards the wall to investigate, not watching where he was going. He had almost reached the familiarly designed snake when he ran smack into something metal.

And heavy.

And very, very hard.

Waving his arms wildly to catch his balance, Harry looked around with narrowed eyes to see what he had hit.

He blinked his eyes to get them more used to the darkness and watched as the item came into focus. A dull, rusty cage sat in the middle of his pathway, which was just big enough to hold an average sized upperclassman.

And, to his horror, that was exactly what it held.

An old skeleton was leaning up against the walls of the cage, one hand wrapped against a bar and the other reaching out as if trying to reach the dim light behind Harry. Staring at the body in horrified and morbid interest, he noted the moldy cloak with an aged Gryffindor patch and a note in the out-stretched fingers.

His hand shaking madly, Harry reached for the paper and gently took it from the brittle bones. He slowly opened the flaky parchment and read the skeleton's last words.

Hope is gone. Tell JIESS good-bye for me.

'Who was Jiess?' Harry wondered silently, making plans to ask the Headmaster soon. The voices he had heard before interrupted his thoughts.

"Food. Sso hungry..."

"Wait, my sslithery friend. All the humansss will be back ssoon, with more new oness..."

Harry immediately recognized what he had not the first time. Both the voices were speaking in Parseltongue, and came from the walls.

One voice was that of a basilisk, Harry knew, but he didn't know what the other was. It wasn't another snake, he knew that much. But what was it? Another chill went up his spine. Snakes can't put people in cages.

And something told him that it wasn't human either.

With that last thought, Harry jumped up and ran with the note still in his hand, but making sure that nothing would hear him. He turned left towards the light and tripped in surprise when he saw all the portraits clustered around the one end of the hallway, still staring at him.

Jumping to his feet again, Harry forgot all dignity and ran straight into the maze of marble hallways that had led him to that spot.

'A basilisk,' Harry thought wryly, 'I can handle. Moving, creepy portraits, skeletons in cages, and unknown creatures are a little too far.'

Harry turned left again, hoping to reach somewhere that he knew. Seeing yet another marble hallway, the same as the others, Harry nearly began to lose it and start to freak out, but kept running from that place that had filled him with an irrational feeling of terror.

Finally, after doubling back once or twice, Harry reached what he idly remembered to be near the Hufflepuff common room. Smiling at reaching familiar land, Harry leaned against the wall and gasped for breath while thinking about what he had just seen. Dumbledore needed to know as soon as possible, obviously, but then what? Harry would have to explain all about the Chamber of Secrets, which apparently had more than one entrance, his Parseltongue ability, and all that would lead to more questions, more suspicion, and Harry was nearly fed up with that as it was!

Shaking his head, Harry looked at his hands which were still shaking, and walked off to find Dumbledore. Personal feelings aside, Harry knew he couldn't deal with this alone, and he needed Dumbledore's help.

Harry decided to take the long way to Dumbledore's office, trying to put it off as long as possible. Thinking that now was as good a time as any, Harry went to check if the Marauders were still in the closet. It seemed to have been hours ago since he trapped them in there.

When he got there, he grumbled in mock disappointment that they had evidently been sprung, but he also looked on with relish to the next battle. Perhaps they wouldn't ostracize him completely for his seemingly Dark gift, but there was only one way to find out.

Harry thought that he had stalled enough, so went to find Dumbledore, and possibly Snape, who might not curse him automatically on sight.

Once he reached the floor Dumbledore's office was on, having thought up a rudimentary strategy as to how to explain his knowledge

of the Chamber, Harry once more confronted the gargoyle in front of his destination.

"Not again," he muttered. "Let's see -- sugar quills, pumpkin pastries, licorice wands, Cockroach Cluster, Blood Pops, err... oh come on, can't you just open!"

The gargoyle refused to move away from the entrance to Dumbledore's office. In fact, Harry could have sworn it smirked at him. "This is not the time, you incompetent little hunk of soon-to-be gravel!"

As the gargoyle made no move to answer Harry's request, or rather demand, he succumbed to the temptation of frustration, and he leaned against the stone wall behind him and began to bang the back of his head against it.

"I give up," he said, "I'm just going to" BANG "sit out here like an idiot" BANG "and wait for someone" BANG "who knows the password."

Albus Dumbledore was currently in his office having a discussion with Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody about the upcoming school year, having finally been able to talk to him rather than the old Auror blowing up. Alastor was still strongly against the whole issue, but grudgingly decided that, as much as he disliked Collins, he would be better as an Assistant professor than a student, and no doubt would help with strategies during the war that, had he been a student, couldn't have helped with.

They were now discussing plans for this year's Defense Against the Dark Arts, and were about ready to start fighting with blows once more.

"I think it would be better to have more of a mix between curses and creatures, Alastor," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling with amusement at the argument.

"I don't think so. Dueling skills are much more important, and I don't care what the Board of Governors has to say about it. Them surviving is much more important than getting an O on the OWLs or the NEWTs."

"But wouldn't it be wisest to prepare them for an occasion of accidentally meeting a werewolf?"

"No, Albus! That's what Care of Magical Creatures is for! We had this argument last year -- you made me a professor, so you have to deal with the consequences. Last year's kids learned a lot about what was important, so I refuse to change anything! Especially since you already have me stuck with Collins!"

Albus held his hands up in defeat. "I surrender, Alastor. Besides, Mr. Collins should be here any moment. You can quiz him, attack him, however you want to interview him."

Albus muttered quietly, still knowing that Moody would be able to hear him, "Maybe he would teach how to defend against Dark Creatures."

"DUMBLEDORE! He is not--" He stopped when he heard a quiet muffled bang from somewhere outside the office.

"What in Merlin's globe . . ." Moody stood and clunked over to the office door and opened it. The bangs became slightly louder and he could hear a low muttering in between them.

Exchanging confused looks with Dumbledore, Moody clunked down the spiral staircase and eased the gargoyle aside. He saw Chris Collins thumping his head against the stone wall, muttering about statues and candy brands.

"Stupid" BANG "smirking" BANG "hunk of" BANG "rock." Harry turned to glare at the gargoyle but paused when he saw Mad-Eye Moody looking at him oddly.

"Finally!" Harry exclaimed in a dead pan voice. "The door has opened! No longer shall I have to guess random candy names, mixed with various expletives! Hurrah!"

Moody rolled his eyes. "Shut up, Collins, and get in here."

Harry complied, following Moody up the staircase and walking into Dumbledore's office. Fawkes chirped and flew onto his arm as soon as Harry had walked in, causing Harry to grin.

"Hello to you too, Fawkes. Are you being socially acceptable today? I hope not. It doesn't seem like much fun."

With a look of amused contempt, Fawkes immediately hopped off Harry, cuffing him upside the head with a wing as the phoenix flew away back to his perch.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Collins," Dumbledore began. "Would you like a lemon drop?"

"No thank you, Professor," Harry replied, and began muttering to himself again. "Lemon drop, lemon drop, how could I forget 'lemon drop'? Stupid password."

Dumbledore cleared his throat, making Harry look up and cease his mutterings. "It's actually rather convenient that you're here at the moment, as Alastor and I were just having a discussion about this year." There was a pause as Moody made a rather inhospitable remark. "Anyway, as you may not know, Alastor here is the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor." Harry looked at the ex-Auror, an inscrutable expression on his face. "The Ministry has also been pushing for Hogwarts to take up the old tradition of having assistant professors for some of the core subjects. The circumstances seem ideal for you to be the Assistant Professor for Defense."

There was silence, and Harry was gaping, all thoughts of his prior purpose pushed out of his mind. "You honestly want me to teach? Students?"

Dumbledore nodded, as benign as ever, but Harry narrowed his eyes; he had been able to second-guess Dumbledore's motives for over a year.

"No, you don't," Harry said, shaking his head. "You're viewing it as a lesser of two evils. You don't trust me at all, do you?"

Moody glared at him. "Of course we don't trust you! Did you expect any different?"

Harry mentally sighed. What hurt was that he didn't. And he knew it would be even worse after what he was about to tell them. "No, I do not."

"Seems you have at least some sense then," Moody growled.

"I'm glad to meet your approval," Harry said flippantly, looking straight at Moody.

Dumbledore was temporarily content to stay out of the way for this battle. 'If those two are going to be teaching together,' Albus thought, 'then they'll have to fight it out sometime. Preferably before the term starts.'

"You have yet to even be considered for my approval, Collins," Moody said glaring back. "I have little or no trust in any of your magical or mental abilities."

"Oh, well thanks," Harry said sarcastically. "My heart is broken, torn to shreds knowing that I don't have the trust of someone unable to keep track of their own limbs." Dumbledore reconsidered his previous thought about not getting involved. This was going to get bloody very soon.

Moody snarled wordlessly and marched over to Harry. They were both equal in height, and had to resort to words and threats to intimidate each other. "I've been chasing Death Eaters since before you were born, boy, and I still have yet to be so careless as to get captured!"

Harry paled in anger, in stark contrast to Moody's rapidly reddening face. "Joy: so you're an OLD ex-Auror who teaches at Hogwarts. A professor, who I might add, can't even teach students how to defend against Dementors and Death Eaters!"

"I haven't seen any proof that you can do better, Collins!"

"Allow me to tell you then. I taught 10 people how to conjure a Patronus in my fifth year. Five of those people and myself went up against 12 Death Eaters later that year. All of us survived! Could any of your students say the same?"

The two ceased arguing and glared at each other, as the tension in the room slowly built up. Dumbledore, esteemed Headmaster though he was, was fully prepared to run for the door at the first sign of an explosion.

Then Harry began laughing. Chuckling crescendoed into full-blown laughter, making the two other wizards look at him oddly.

"What in Hades' name is so amusing?" Moody asked crabily.

Still amused, Harry answered, "I haven't argued like that for a very long time. And I apologize as well. I have the highest respect for you, but this was too good an opportunity to pass up. Not to mention," Harry continued a little more seriously and with a wry tone, "I still don't consider us equal for that Cheering Charm. That was very cruel and unusual."

Moody looked at him as if afraid Harry would spontaneously combust and turn into an alien at any moment. "You're insane," he growled, and Harry nodded.

"Most likely. But then again, I'm not the one who thinks I should teach."

They both looked at Dumbledore.

"Don't worry, Collins," Moody said, "everyone already knows that Dumbledore is off his rocker. Anyway," he continued, looking back at Harry, "I still have little or no confidence in your magical abilities. So I'm challenging you to a duel."

"A duel?"

"Yes, Collins. It's where two wizards fight against each other, using wands and various spells to try and incapacitate the other." Harry

shot him a sneering look, which Moody ignored. "I know you're partial to Dark Magic, but--"

"I'm not partial to Dark Magic. It is a resource that has been grouped under one title because megalomaniacs prefer it. That does NOT make it any different from Light magic, seeing as how you could kill someone with Wingardium Leviosa or Reducto, or--"

"Alright, I get your point. But as the challenger, I am making the rules."

Harry rolled his eyes. He knew exactly what Moody was going to say, and chanted along with him.

"No Dark Magic, especially Unforgivables. You can not use other people as distractions, but you can Transfigure things to look like people. This is a one-out-of-one match; no redoing. Whoever is Stunned or otherwise incapacitated is the loser. The other is the victor."

Moody glared at Harry who smirked back. "I know your dueling rules by heart, Moody. Merlin knows I've been at the receiving end of them enough times."

"Whatever, Collins. We're going to duel next week, and depending on how badly you're beaten, we'll decide the syllabus."

"What?" Harry started indignantly. "What do you mean 'depending on how badly I'm beaten'? What about if I win?"

"Don't make me laugh. You're not that good."

"Oh, we'll see about that, Moody. I suggest you conjure a white flag now and get it over with."

"Why? Do you want me to give it to you? Are you incapable of conjuring by yourself?"

"Okay, gentlemen," Albus said, deciding the time was ripe to step in. "Now that that is settled, you will need to know that the Ministry is

coming in today for an inspection of Hogwarts curriculum and an interview of the teachers. Now, Mr. Collins," Albus addressed specifically, putting on a somewhat stern look, "you can by no means attack or insult them. Understood?"

Harry grumbled. "That depends on who--"

"Yes or no, Collins," Moody interrupted and Harry quickly went through his mental list of pros and cons of agreeing to anything. "Fine, I'll try not to hold the lousy politicians responsible for what their others selves did. Do you know who is coming?"

"None at all. Just that Barty Crouch and a team of three others will be accompanying him," Albus answered, and promised himself that he would find out these stories about various Ministry officials Collins seemed to have stockpiled. Then he watched curiously as the seventeen-year-old paled and seemed a bit fidgety.

"Actually," Harry began hesitantly, "I'm not sure if right before a Ministry inspection is the best time to tell you, but there's..."

"Albus!" Minerva McGonagall interrupted, sticking her head through the office door without knocking. "They're here."

"Well, then, I believe that I must head down, and you two need to have some semblance of order when they step in," Albus concluded, still watching Harry curiously. "We will continue this conversation later."

And he swept out the door followed by McGonagall, leaving a stunned Harry who was now rather worried and a suspicious Mad-Eye Moody who looked like he wanted nothing more than to strangle the old wizard who had just left the room.

(OOoOO)

Sirius Black tried valiantly not to yawn as he followed the Minister into Hogwarts, and as his cousin's daughter, the self-proclaimed Tonks, trailed after the three other Ministry bureaucrats. This was the part of

being an Auror he hated the most, even more than regulating Floo travel: being a bodyguard for the Minister of Magic.

The man was so radically different from Sirius that he thought he must have been some kind mass murderer in a past life, because karma was surely catching up with him to make him protect the 'strict, over-bearing, handle-bar-mustache-wearing pansy', as Lily had fondly called the Minister, for today.

Of course, Tonks had it much worse. She was supposed to guard three possible Death Eaters. Guard them not from escape, as her hands obviously itched to put handcuffs on the overbearing aristocrats, but guard them from harm.

'Ha!' Sirius thought crabbily. 'Like Voldemort would attack them. Why would he risk endangering the 3 who have the best spy positions in the Ministry?'

"Ah, Barty," Dumbledore interrupted Sirius's train of thought as the old wizard greeted Crouch. "Such a pleasure to see you at Hogwarts again."

"Charmed," the Minister said stiffly. "But this is not a social visit, Albus."

"Of course, of course," Dumbledore agreed before turning to the others amiably. "Misters Crouch and Malfoy, Mrs. Lestrangle. Aurors Tonks and Black."

Lucius Malfoy looked at the headmaster with obvious disdain, and outright sneering at McGonagall who had come as Deputy Headmistress.

Bellatrix Lestrangle looked as aristocratic and unconcerned as ever, but now that Dumbledore knew her to be a Death Eater in a different dimension, he could see the well-hidden glint of cruelty in her eyes.

Barty Crouch Jr. seemed to take after his father in height and stature, but without the handle-bar mustache and tense look. He looked around the castle in seeming interest, as he had been home-

schooled by private tutors, but his eyes paid extra attention to the windows and locks on the front door to the Entrance Hall.

Dumbledore observed all of this in an instant, automatically considering them all to be a threat, Minister (and possibly Sirius Black, if peace and quiet was his main goal) included.

"Now, what is first on the list, Dumbledore?" Minister Crouch asked, and Albus stopped his imaginings of throwing them all out of the castle and into the middle of the Forbidden Forest to get them out of his castle.

"Actually, Transfiguration is the closest class, so we'll begin there..."

(OOoOO)

Lily marched up to the Charms corridor, her newly rewritten class plans in hand. That poltergeist who had an unfortunate habit of choosing her papers as flame torches would be in for a surprise, and not a very pleasant one. She curled her mouth into a malicious grin, attracting the attention of the short main Charms teacher ahead of her.

"I shudder to think what you have up your sleeve with that look on, my dear," the amiable Charms professor said, and Lily laughed. "Just imagining a fate for Peeves, Filius, no need to worry."

"Ah, for a second I was concerned that the Marauders were responsible for that look of wrath, seeing as how their plans have already been foiled today," Flitwick continued, and Lily raised one eyebrow.

"Oh really, now? I heard a bit about that, but have yet to hear the full story..."

"Sit down then. We still have time for a good story before that group of 'representatives' shows up."

The two old friends settled down for an amusing half-hour full of conversation while other departments of the castle went through what

Lily had earlier described as a process similar to the painfulness of auditing.

(OOoOO)

Harry hastily departed, walking quickly down the revolving staircase and onto the landing below. There was a small bustle of people moving up and down the hallways, carrying magical artifacts or levitating past school projects to set up their classrooms. He nodded to a passing professor, Vector if he didn't miss his guess, and continued idly walking down the hallway.

If any thought could be deciphered from his rapidly churning mind it would be, 'What the heck just happened?'

A teacher? As Moody's assistant no less? Harry knew that he could teach, he had no problems with that, but he had wanted to actually finish his school career, and, even though he had somehow ended up at a completely different Hogwarts, he thought that that would have remained a constant.

He snickered to himself as he thought about what Hermione's reaction would have been. She probably would have said something about dropping out, not living up to potential, and all delivered in a piercing shriek that could give Mrs. Weasley a run for her money.

"Collins!" A voice behind him barked, and Harry turned around to see Moody walking up to him. "You heard Albus, we need to at least act like you're competent and able to teach, so you will explain the first through third year material, got it?"

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Is there already something planned out, or just improvise?"

"Improvise probably, but keep it general and no mention of any specific spells. Merlin knows that the idiots would just declare the spell illegal rather than let students use something useful.

"Ah," Harry said blithely, giving a bitter grin. "Now that sounds like the Ministry I know. I'm guessing the DADA wing is still on the second floor?"

Moody nodded and they both walked in that direction, Harry muttering disconnected sentences as he planned an impromptu syllabus.

(OOoOO)

The mantra currently going over and over in Albus's head was so close to actual cursing that he could actually see Minerva thinning her lips and shaking her finger at him.

'Of all the people to send!' He thought as he seemed impeccably calm to those he was currently leading towards the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. While Chris Collins had agreed to not outright cursing whoever came on this expedition to bring Hogwarts more under Ministry control, Dumbledore doubted the teen would remember it after seeing the people following him.

He walked a bit ahead of the chattering group, ignoring the accompanying McGonagall's betrayed look as she was left in conversation with the small-talking witch and wizards. Unnoticed by anyone else, Albus reversed the hinges of the classroom door so he could enter first, under the guise of holding the door open, so he could warn Chris, and more than likely Moody as well, who also was unlikely to keep his temper completely under control.

Opening the door, he saw the two on opposite sides of the room, writing on separate pieces of parchment, both having disgruntled looks on their faces. 'By Merlin, those two will never get along,' Albus thought with a chuckle. They both looked up, though, when they heard the hinges creak, and Albus gave them both warning looks as people began to enter the room.

'Bloody hell, bloody hell, bloody hell,' Harry thought rapidly as he watched Bellatrix Lestrange, Lucius Malfoy, and the two Crouches enter the room. He clenched his fist tightly around his quill so his hand wouldn't delve into his pocket and whip out his wand. 'I can't believe this! All that needs to happen now is for Voldemort to appear,

and the four people I would gladly jinx into oblivion would all be in the same place.'

With that last murderous thought, Harry shoved his feelings away into a corner of his mind--the same that contained the horrible details of his visions of Voldemort and scenes that Dementors brought up--before turning his expression into that of a somewhat cold and aristocratic, if he could pull off yet another act, almost-pureblood, which would no doubt be useful in later situations.

(OOoOO)

Dumbledore watched with not a small amount of trepidation as Collins turned white as a sheet and got a horrible murderous glint in his eye, but he blinked and the expression was gone, replaced by such indifferent politesse that Albus almost wondered if he had imagined the look in the first place.

"Minister Crouch, Mr. Malfoy and Crouch, and Mrs. Lestrangle, may I introduce Alastor Moody, though I daresay you have met him before, and Chris Collins, the Assistant Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor."

"Reaching into the bottom of the barrel, Dumbledore?" Malfoy said dismissively as he didn't spare a glance to the two. "They look like they've gotten into fights with alley cats."

Dumbledore was about to respond when he was interrupted.

"Ah, but said alley cats were quite the Dark fighters, all those dangerous whiskers and sandpaper tongues," Harry responded with a large, but well-hidden to any but the receiver, amount of contempt. "Alas, don't get me started on the deadly fur, good sir!"

Malfoy narrowed his gray eyes dangerously at him, but Harry smirked, noting as he did so that the devil-woman next to him was looking at him with interest.

She looked at the now-conversing group of Dumbledore, the Minister, and Moody. Bellatrix, Malfoy, and Crouch, Jr. were still surveying

Harry like a new interest, or (in Malfoy's case) like some deadly disease that a cockroach had brought in.

"Oh, Lucius," Bellatrix said softly and mockingly. "Brought down by a Mudblood, how could you?"

"Mudblood?" Harry said in a properly indignant tone of voice. "I would think not."

She raised her eyebrow sardonically at him. "Really...how I doubt that."

"Chris Collins, madam," he said in the formal tone that he had read about, for some reason or another. Promising himself to clean his hand and lips with bleach and lye later, he walked for a couple paces and kissed Lestrage's hand. "Canadian, however, but pureblood."

"Canadian?" Crouch Jr. cut in, and Harry's vision turned red for a second. "What brought you to lovely Britain?"

"There is only so much living among Muggles that one will put up with," Harry said in a tone of disgust. "This castle is at least an improvement, and will keep me up to date on recent goings-on."

Bellatrix stepped closer to him, and he was hard-pressed to keep himself from gagging from her whisper in his ear.

"I'll perhaps have some use for you, Chris Collins, I and my...affiliation. Perhaps in a more, civilized," she looked over her shoulder in disgust, "location, we can have a more in-depth discussion."

Harry smirked with her as she stepped back, his jaw clenching to hide his real expression. "Perhaps we will, Madam Lestran--"

"Ah, Chris," Albus cut in, and Harry didn't think he'd ever felt so grateful in all of his life. "Now, what were your plans for the younger years?"

Harry finished his act by half-bowing to Bellatrix and the other two, and turned to grab his piece of parchment.

"For the first years, I had planned on making the first few weeks purely lecture and discussion, telling them the weight and responsibility of magic, especially this subject since it deals with offensive and dangerous defensive spells. After all, I wouldn't want to tell them a bunch of curses on their first day and let them wreak havoc!"

Minister Crouch nodded solemnly with his plan. "Good choice, Mr., Collins, was it? Children should definitely know the impact of their powers. But please, continue."

"After that, I was planning on going into defensive magic first. Basic shields, maybe some weak disarming, and a couple others that will build up stamina and help them defensively. As the years go on, I'll go into small offensive spells, though it will mostly be technique, aim, and shields. Then for the second years..."

Harry continued describing his lesson plans for the first three years, and the Minister had agreed to all of them. Though this may have been because of Harry's often mentioning of teaching rules and laws, not to mention subtle flattery that the older wizard didn't catch, more than his actual agreement with Harry's wide selection of jinxes Harry knew he would be teaching.

"Very good," Crouch nodded. "I told you, Albus, Assistant Professors are vital to good schools. They are old enough to teach but young enough for the importance of the law to influence them."

Crouch had turned back towards the door to continue the tour, when Harry calmly and deliberately raised his hand to flip off the Minister of Magic. "You can take your influence of the law and shove it!" Harry mouthed clearly, making Moody and the three purebloods off to the side choke slightly and Dumbledore just pretend to ignore the whole thing.

Dumbledore also left, and Bellatrix had nodded to him one last time before her and her two companions left as well.

The door slammed shut, and Harry collapsed into the chair behind him, his hands shaking.

"A little obvious there, Collins? What were you thinking--?" Moody narrowed his eyes at the rebellious person in front of him before realizing that he wasn't taking in a word, but staring off to space towards something only he could see.

Harry walked slowly to the door, still wrapped in his thoughts and memories, not even noticing Moody shake his head and walk back towards his desk.

After Collins left, Alastor sat on a student desk deep in thought. With how Collins acted, and seemed at least mostly mentally stable, he had forgotten that this soldier from another dimension was only seventeen, just put face-to-face with his deadly enemies.

Moody sighed. If Voldemort hadn't been around, then Collins, Moody himself, and hundreds of others would be completely different, not having to fight and lose their grand visions of the world so soon.

But darkness was engulfing the land, and everyone would suffer with it, even putting school-age children in situations they shouldn't be in.

(OOoOO)

Harry roamed the castle, careful to stay in corridors where no one else was, as he slowly processed what had just happened. He had confronted, talked to, even acted friendly with, the people he hated for years. He climbed precariously onto the railing of a staircase, and wrapped his arms around himself, looking down about fifty feet to the ground, one leg swinging over empty air.

He had just pretended to be pureblood, on top of pretending to be Muggleborn for everyone else, and had feigned interest in joining Voldemort. Harry knew that from a technical angle this was an advantage, but he couldn't help feeling slightly disgusted with himself for doing so. Ron would have horrified, as well as Hermione, though

she at least would be able to process that tricking Lestrangle into later revealing her allegiance with Voldemort would be helpful.

He sat sank in thought for hours, sometimes lost in discussion of how to best aid the fight against Voldemort, coming up with various situations that could, in theory, weaken Voldemort's strength. Other times just lost in memories of his home and what everyone might be doing, while the rest of the castle waited with bated breath for the Ministry officials to leave without somehow putting the school under their thumb, as the Death Eaters were wont to do every couple years.

Harry crept up the staircase in his Invisibility Cloak, a small grin on his face as he passed by stern and studious looking portraits, the backgrounds more often than not bookcases or boards with long strings of equations on them. He quietly reached the sternest-looking one of them all, who was currently snoozing in a proper-looking bed with a ('How can a night-cap look so...no-nonsense?' Harry asked himself) crabby face.

"A symmetric line with two vertices," Harry whispered, and a painted gizmo opened the hidden doorway without the wizard ever waking up.

Luna looked up from her jigsaw puzzle that encompassed a good-sized portion of the left corner.

"Ready to go Snizzle-catching?" Harry asked with a grin, and Luna eagerly nodded, grabbing her wand and a net before running over and wrapping herself in Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

"I think they'll be in the Potions Dungeon, how about you?" She asked with her devilish smile, and the two quickly but quietly padded off to the dungeons, Harry having spied to overhear the passwords to both the Slytherin Common Rooms and Snape's Office.

The two separated, Luna going off to the Slytherin Common Room and Harry walking softly towards Snape's office. They were looking for Snizzles, after all. It wasn't their fault that the creatures were attracted to pranks and high areas of mischief, was it?

He turned the office a luminous shade orange, with ridiculously-flowery drapes and a collection of Technicolor plates on the wall. Frills were obvious along every possible surface, and random 'ribbits' came from the desk.

With any luck, Snape would just go into a diabetic coma without ever finding out who did this.

Finished, he locked the office door and ran to the Slytherin hallway, where Luna was just coming out.

"You all set, Miss Lovegood?" Harry asked bombastically.

"All set, Mr. -"Collins!"-, " Luna said with a evil smirk that was a far cry from her usual spacey look, and Harry escorted her back to the Ravenclaw Common Room, their work done for the night.

"Collins!" The same interrupting voice from before yelled.

Harry's eyes refocused, having been deep in his reminiscing. He blinked before registering that McGonagall was trying to get his attention.

"Welcome to the world of the living," she said dryly, and he grinned sheepishly. "And you should know better than trying to balance on a moving stair rail fifty feet above the ground."

Harry sighed and leaped off the railing, not noticing McGonagall's wince as she imagined watching someone falling off the other side.

"Dumbledore wants to see you in his office. Something about finishing a discussion," she said ominously, and Harry frowned. He had been so caught up in his thoughts that he had forgotten about the Chamber of Secrets and whatever that other creature was, but listened to McGonagall speak once more. "He wondered if a whole force of Order members was necessary, but I'm fairly certain he was joking."

"They might be necessary," Harry muttered before walking towards the Headmaster's office, ignoring the Transfiguration Professor's startled look.

Harry looked once more at his foe, the stone gargoyle.

"Lemon drops," Harry said with certainty. It didn't move. "What the--! What else could you possibly be? Wait, wait, don't tell me, Lemon Heads!"

The gargoyle jumped to the side, much to his disgust. "Lemon Heads? Oh, how ridiculous..."

He knocked on the door, and got a responding, "Come in."

Harry opened the door, and began the conversation with, "What do you know about the Chamber of Secrets?"

(OOoOO)

Apparently, that wasn't the smartest opening to the conversation, as Harry soon found out.

When he asked the question, he hadn't realized that there were three other people in the office, other than Dumbledore: Snape, Pettigrew, and Lily.

The suspicious looks from Dumbledore and Snape were nearly powerful enough to melt him into a puddle.

"What does an urban legend have to do with anything?" Lily asked in curiosity, and Harry looked nervously at the ground, shutting the office door behind him.

"Everything, but I need to know about its relation to events in this world."

Dumbledore clasped his hands together, seemingly ready to answer. "It was rumored to have opened fifty or so years ago, while Armando Dippet was still Headmaster of this school. Why?"

"Were both Tom Riddle and Hagrid enrolled at this time?"

"Yes, and Hagrid was expelled for supposedly opening it, though I assume now that it was Mr. Riddle who did so?"

"Yes," Harry said, and sighed. "The Chamber of Secrets has opened once more."

Now he got a reaction from everyone in the room. Lily and Pettigrew, who had been listening to the conversation unbelievably, now protested any such thing, saying that the Chamber of Secrets was just a myth and couldn't be opened.

Snape was demanding an explanation of how he knew any such thing, and commenting on how suspicious it was that it opened right after Harry had gotten there. Dumbledore tapped a gizmo on his desk with his wand, and then shot sparks in the air to quiet everyone.

"How do you know this?" He asked earnestly, every hint of the affable Headmaster gone, replaced by a powerful leader. "Where is the entrance and what is it exactly?"

Harry had recognized the machine on Dumbledore's desk as something that corresponds to a medallion worn by every Order member, and decided it would be best to answer now before anyone else came.

"The Chamber of Secrets has passageways everywhere, but the actual Chamber of Secrets is miles under the school. I know the location because of my history, but discovered that it was open earlier today when I got lost in a not so pleasant part of the school. As for what's in it..." Harry paused here, unsure how to continue. They would obviously ask how Harry knew a Basilisk was inside. "There's a Basilisk," his voice went over Lily's gasp, "and... something else. It wasn't there in my world, but it is in this one, and I have no idea what it is."

"How do you know it's there if you didn't see it enough to recognize it?" Snape asked slyly, able to pick out the holes in Harry's story.

"I, well, I heard it," Harry said in a rush, and got many disbelieving glances.

"Heard it?" Pettigrew asked skeptically, and Harry didn't even bother to look up and glare at him, unwilling to meet anyone else's glance.

"Yes, it was talking to the Basilisk," Harry said.

There was dead silence as everyone comprehended what he meant.

Knowing that there was no use denying it, Harry found a mental image of a snake, and hissed, "I'm a Parselmouth."

"Stupefy!"

Harry automatically raised a shield, not knowing exactly who had yelled to spell. He turned to see James and Sirius standing there wands raised, both, apparently, having tried to Stun him at the same time at hearing him speak Parseltongue.

"Damn it," Harry muttered, shoving back his hurt that the two had shot Stunning Curses at him, not even knowing the situation. "I come in here, let myself be surrounded by people with wands, don't have my own wand out, and people still try to hex me!"

He turned back around to see the other four watching him warily, their wands drawn and watching him for any sign of a threat.

Harry's ire rose uncontrollably, though he tightened his grip on his magic. He tried to warn these people, echoes of the people he had known and cared about, and they constantly responded by treating him like nothing more than an uncontrollable bomb that could go off in any minute.

"To Hell with it!" He snarled ferally, and they all jumped at the rage in his voice. "Do you people really think that I would warn you about a basilisk if I was bent on killing the lot of you? I know several things that can help this war, this war against someone I've fought and know more about than anyone else here, and I have had it! Perhaps if you

used your minds, you would realize that Parseltongue is something someone is born with. They don't acquire it by evil rituals or planning to take over the world! You are losing this war, and you spend so much time fighting allies rather than enemies that I can hardly wonder why!"

The six in the room other than Harry all had wide eyes at getting torn into so viciously, and Harry wondered if this was how Mrs. Weasley felt on occasion.

"So now, if you'll excuse me," Harry bit out, yanking out his wand and Summoning the Sorting Hat, "I'll go and kill the wretched creatures myself, since you won't be any help. What I don't get is that for once I actually told adults what was going on, Merlin knows I have enough experience taking care of things by myself, and it has gotten me into an even worse situation!"

Harry marched over to the door, James and Sirius hurriedly running out of the way of his flaming eyes. Wrenching it open, Harry turned once more, though this time to look out Fawkes.

"You coming or not?" He gruffly asked the phoenix which trilled and flew after him, trilling angrily at the people in the office one last time before the door shut, and silence fell once more.

"What was that?" Sirius asked in shock, having gotten the most glares during the explosion. "He isn't really going to go and try to kill a basilisk, is he?"

"I believe he is," Dumbledore answered, still looking at the door. "And I think we all just made a horrible mistake.

(OOoOO)

Harry ran down the office stairs, trying not to think about the people upstairs. 'Now I know I had a good reason not to tell them who I was. I can't even imagine what would have happened had they known I was a Potter!' Harry was so intent on his mental rant that he didn't notice the Prewitt twins and Remus heading in his direction.

"Oi, Ferguson," Gideon yelled. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

Harry glared at him, still intensely angry and perfectly willing to spread that anger around. "Snake hunting, Prewitt."

The redhead ran backwards in exaggeration as if afraid to get his head literally ripped off. "Sheesh, I pity the snake. What got you so fired up?"

"Ask the idiots in Dumbledore's office, and don't feel sorry for the snake, feel sorry for the surrounding area."

He was gone before any of the three could form another question.

(OOoOO)

Harry ran towards the corridor past the kitchens, trying to remember the most direct path there. He recognized the general style of the portraits and slowed down, now trying to formulate a plan.

"I can't exactly go in there sword-flashing and yelling out spells, can I?" He mused to himself. This would be so much easier if it were just a Basilisk, or he at least knew what that other thing was. He turned to see if Fawkes would point out any suggestions, but saw the phoenix a couple paces back, not coming forward.

"What?" Harry asked in confusion, before he realized what the problem was.

"You're tied to Dumbledore, and I don't trust him at the moment so you can't help me," Harry said in realization, and Fawkes chirped back mournfully, before disappearing in a flash of flame. Harry sighed and continued contemplating. He should have remembered that Fawkes was only called to him in the beginning because of his loyalty to Dumbledore. Now, however, the bird couldn't stay with someone so angry at the Headmaster.

"I guess it's just you and me," Harry said to the Hat, and slid it onto his head.

(OOoOO)

There was a loud argument going on in Dumbledore's office, with everyone yelling at the same time and nothing actually getting done.

The two Prewitt brothers nearly fought their way up to Dumbledore. "What's going on?" They yelled over the cacophony of noise. "And what'd you do to get Collins so angry?"

Albus looked at them, looking slightly harassed and overwhelmed himself. "It's a long story. I believe that anyone in the room can fill you in," he called before being yanked into another conversation.

The two raised their eyebrows before finding someone else to ask.

Remus Lupin, on the other hand, had no problem discovering what all the commotion was about.

"Collins's a Parselmouth!" James, Sirius, and Peter told him as soon as he entered the office.

"So?"

James looked at him oddly. "What do you mean 'So?', Remus? You were right about Collins being Dark after all!"

"Because he can talk to snakes?" Remus clarified, his eyes narrowed at the three of them.

"Yes," Sirius said slowly, as if talking to someone rather dense. "You sure you didn't bang your head against something, Moony?"

"Perfectly sure, Sirius," Remus replied coldly. "Collins has a Dark ability after all, of course he should be considered a threat based on that alone."

James and Sirius nodded, while Peter and Lily seemed to catch what Remus was saying between the lines.

"Back up, Lily," Peter whispered. "Run away in three, two, one!"

The two scuttled out of the way as Remus unleashed his not inconsiderable temper on the two in front of him.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN JUST BECAUSE HE CAN TALK TO SNAKES HE'S DARK? I'M A BLOODY WEREWOLF! YOU DON'T SEEM TO HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THAT! I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU TWO HYPOCRITES! I DIDN'T EVEN TELL YOU WHAT I WAS. YOU HAD TO FIGURE IT OUT FOR YOURSELVES, AND NOW COLLINS TELLS YOU OF HIS OWN FREE WILL, BECAUSE HE WANTED TO GET RID OF A THREAT TO THE SCHOOL, AND YOU TRIED TO CURSE HIM? YOU'RE BLOODY WELL LUCKY HE DIDN'T SET A PAIR OF ANACONDAS ON YOU!"

The two Aurors shank down and tried to run, but the circling wall of watching spectators didn't provide much of an escape route.

"Thank you, Remus, for quieting the room in that effective, if rather unusual, way," Dumbledore remarked lightly. "Now, in a summary, the Chamber of Secrets apparently contains a basilisk and an unidentified creature, if our source is correct, and it is our job to see that the threat is gotten rid of."

Gideon raised his hand, and, sighing, Dumbledore pointed at him before his attention was gotten in a more spectacular fashion. "Yes, Mr. Prewitt?"

"I don't think Collins needs any help. He looked pretty much ready to rain down Armageddon on the whole castle."

Dumbledore watched the surrounding people roll their eyes in amusement. "Be that as it may, I don't think setting a seventeen-year-old off into battle is the wisest thing, so if we can figure out where the entrance to the Chamber is at..."

Fawkes appeared in a flash of fire at that moment, heading straight towards Dumbledore and hitting the old wizard with his wings, ignoring the startled exclamations from the rest of the room.

"Alright, Fawkes, I believe I've gotten the point, there's no need to attack me...Ouch!"

The phoenix settled on lighting Dumbledore's beard on fire, and then flew over to Dumbledore's prized collection of texts.

"No, you malicious turkey!" Dumbledore yelled in horror, forgetting that his office was full of people who had never heard the esteemed Headmaster act like this. "Not the books!"

Fawkes shot him a condescending glance, and clawed out a certain text. Lily, who was closest, pulled it off of the bookshelf and began thumbing through the pages.

"Alright," the redhead said uncertainly. "A book full of creatures, but I don't know what page..."

The phoenix began hurriedly scraping the pages back, turning to a specific one and ignoring Dumbledore's wince as the bird's claws raked each piece of age-old parchment. He stopped squeezing his eyes shut in horror when Fawkes trilled, and Lily gasped at the creature on the page.

"The Justern, a Dark Creature that favors dark and damp conditions, is one of the few non-serpentine creatures able to communicate in Parseltongue. Usually solitary and hostile, the Justern will only allow the companionship of a Basilisk, usually only one over 900 years old'...yadda yadda yadda...'The Justern is dangerous to any and all humans that cross its path, save for the first Parselmouth it meets. On that occasion, the Justern will bond with the human and retain a mind similar to him or her in goals and basic behavior. Any other Parselmouths that cross the Justern's path will be in extreme danger, as the creature will not stop hunting him or her until either it or the speaker is dead.

'There is no recorded method of killing a Justern, due to their rarity and viciousness.'

"Oh no," Lily breathed, realizing the desperateness of the situation despite her feelings about what Collins was. "We have to find Collins!"

(OOoOO)

"Ah, Mr. Collins... No, that name really doesn't fit you at all, but I'm just a hat, not a busybody. So, what can a thinking cap like me help you with?" A wheezy voice said in Harry's mind. "And before you answer, it would really help if you lowered your Occlumency shields a bit."

Harry rolled his eyes and lowered them just a fraction. "I need help," he responded silently. "Last time you gave me Godric Gryffindor's sword. I need it again."

"Again? Before?" The Sorting Hat repeated. "Ah, well, this is interesting and certainly worth looking into. What do you need the Sword for?"

"To kill Slytherin's Basilisk. I'm fully aware that I've changed from being twelve years old, but I still have the same purpose."

"No you don't," the Hat disagreed. "Last time you were desperate to save yourself and the sister of your best friend... Don't start raising your shields now, it's not like I'm going to spread the information around! This time though, you mean to kill the Basilisk and its companion immediately, only bringing yourself into danger. You've changed, a lot, Collins (if you still want to be called that). You're certainly more of a Slytherin than Gryffindor, but Salazar's sword can't bring down its own familiar. You're angrier than last time my other self spoke with you, that much is certain. Capable of Dark Magic... and Unforgivables as well.. tsk tsk. I see your reasons clear enough, but the magics protecting the sword won't let me give it to you. Sorry about that,"

"What a shock," Harry muttered. "I kill one basilisk with a sword, and can't use it this time. There was only a basilisk last time, and now there are two things I have to deal with. Thanks Hat, you've a tremendous help. Honestly."

"Don't get all snippy on me, Collins!" The Hat said in a tone of annoyance. "You're not restricted to a second year education any more! If you need a sword, which you shouldn't, just conjure one! Really, the level of education these days..."

Harry whipped the hat off and glared at it angrily before stuffing it in his pocket. "Useless rag," he muttered. "Should sell it to a quilting guild..."

His comments were cut off when a breath of hot, noxious air enveloped him, and he looked up to see two large, bottomless black eyes glinting at him malevolently. Surrounding the two eyes was a moth eaten face, looking like it was wrapped in sparse, moldy strips of linen.

The portraits on either side of the corridor were looking on eagerly, their eyes now bright and alive. One thing Harry noticed with a rather illogical part of his mind, that this thing was tall, made even more so by his own lack in height.

"What are you?" He gasped out, barely realizing it came out as Parseltongue.

The Justern tilted its head, considering, before smiling gleefully at him.

"You're not the one to whom I first spoke," it rasped, and Harry couldn't help but respond sarcastically.

"No really, and here it's obvious that I wouldn't ask what you were if I had spoken to you before, you mutated mummy!"

The Justern growled, and bodily picked Harry up, who was now beginning to realize the dangers of sarcasm as he couldn't even reach his wand in this position. Then he was thrown heavily into the wall thirty feet away, with the creature charging forward to continue the fight.

Harry whipped out his wand. "Reducto!"

The beam hit the creature full on. Harry knew it did. But nothing happened.

"Oh, this is wonderful," Harry bit out, and taking the Sorting Hat's advice, conjured a sword.

"This is not going to be fun."

(OOoOO)

"Tinny!" Dumbledore called clapping his hands together as the rest of the room processed the knowledge that there were deadly creatures roaming around the school, as Dumbledore obviously believed Collins.

The house-elf appeared, looking at the gathered group curiously. "Yes, Master Dumbledore?"

"Do you know where Chris Collins is? Can you tell us his exact location?" The old wizard asked genially, hiding his turmoiling thoughts.

The house-elf scuffed her feet along the floor, obviously wondering how to answer.

"Come on!" Snape snapped angrily. "We haven't got all day!"

Tinny glared at him dangerously, something that clearly shocked everyone else in the room, but turned back to Dumbledore. "Tinny can only take sir so far. There are some places not even house-elves will go."

"Lead on, then, please," Dumbledore commanded, and the house-elf squeaked a demand that they hurry, and scurried down the stairs from the Headmaster's office.

The group of bemused but ready-to-fight Order members followed the determined elf, who soon led them to the marble corridors near the Hufflepuff Common Room.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" James asked in bemusement. "Hufflepuff doesn't exactly smack of evil, after all."

"Tinny knows the way," the house-elf squeaked back, and she skidded to a halt in front of a drab corridor.

"There," she said, pointing a long finger down it. "Left, right, and straight on."

"Thank you," Dumbledore said dismissively, before running down the corridor with his wand drawn. The rest of the group quickly followed suit, as they all turned left, and then right, meeting a patch of hallway that went in three different directions.

They were distinctly Dark looking corridors, with paintings that hissed malevolently at them and torches far apart. One voice was distinguishable from the other mutters.

"I suppose you're looking for the young idiot," a portrait of an old woman said with a smirk. Her background was faded and looked mildly like an old dungeon. Her clothes were reminiscence of a Dark Ages queen. "He went down there," she pointed to her left, "and is more than likely already dead. You might as well leave and go back. He was quite rude, after all, what with his aura being all purposeful and not submitting to fear before he discovered anything. He seems too stubborn to be worth the effort."

Snape muttered, in obvious agreement with at least part of what the portrait had said, until they all heard a hoarse yell to their right.

"Bloody--Riddle--megalomaniac--" and then there was a tremendous crash.

"Hmph," the portrait muttered, as everyone ran in the direction of the noise. "Wonder if they know about the Basilisk." And she flitted down the portraits to watch the show.

(OOoOO)

Harry slashed at the Justern, but it easily weaved out of the way and slashed at him with deadly looking claws. He nearly made it out of the way, but still got three deep gouges across his left arm.

"Can't believe bloody Tom Riddle decided to get a new pet," Harry yelled hoping to distract it with the thought that it was nothing more than a pet. Most creatures, Harry had discovered, usually paused to mull over this new insult. "How do you like that, belonging to a megalomaniac?"

"Suits me just fine," the creature rasped back. "After all, he doesn't own me like he so obviously has a grip on you."

Harry paused, not expecting to have the conversation turned back on him. That pause cost him dearly, as the Justern hit Harry with the full length of its long arm and smashed him into the wall once more. He winced as he heard an audible crack and felt a sudden burning pain near his chest.

Harry picked himself up and wavered unsteadily as he aimed his wand point-blank at the creature once more.

"Dos nix kesium!" A reddish-black, smoky ray flew out of his wand, hitting the Justern at the joint between neck and sternum, but nothing happened.

But Harry didn't notice the nonexistent effect his spell had, as he heard a gasp upon finishing the spell. Harry turned to see a group of the Order and narrowed his eyes at them. He had no time to deal with gasps at his choice of spells.

"Oh goody, the cavalry," Harry shot at them before turning back around and heaving his sword at the creature. It entered the Justern's stomach, and exited near its back, but seemed to have no effect.

Harry outright gaped as it yanked the sword out of itself and started weaving it expertly through the air. "You overgrown movie prop!" Harry spluttered at it. "Give me back my sword!"

Dumbledore had spent this time shooting spell after spell at the Justern, but his spells had no effect either. All the others had curses ready on their lips, the Prewitt twins having the most unusual planned, but they all paused as they watched Collins execute a flying leap at the creature's head and latch onto its neck, pounding on its head angrily.

They gaped wordlessly as Harry started hissing at it in the infamous snake language, most wincing as he did so, and then yank the sword out of the Justern's grasp.

"Ha!" Harry yelled in success, right before he was ungently pulled off the unhappy creature's neck and thrown forcefully to the ground.

"Unh!" Harry whispered as the broken rib pressed into his lung and his vision turned black at the edges. Then his eyes widened at the giant fist aimed straight for his head and rolled quickly out of the way, wincing at the cracks the fist made in the marble floor.

"You know," Harry commented as loudly as possible while taking only shallow breaths, "you never did tell me what you were."

"A Justern," the creature and everyone else said at the same time, and Harry sighed. "Great. Where's Hermione when I need her? I have no idea what that is."

"Who is this 'Hermione' of whom you speak?" The Justern rasped, speaking in English rather than Parselmouth. "They seem like a person worth talking to once I'm done with you."

Harry didn't miss the hidden threat. "Middle-aged woman, black hair, dark eyes. Her real name is Bellatrix Lestrange," Harry lied, "but I call her Hermione." He thought he heard a stifled chuckle from the peanut gallery, but wasn't exactly sure.

Harry thought over what the Justern had said as he shot another Dark curse at the creature. "What do you mean when you're done with me?" Harry never realized that his sarcasm was moving up the scale towards delirious, as the pain in his slashed arm detracted the amount of effort he was willing to put into common sense. He sniffed

pathetically and made his voice mockingly falsetto. "Does this mean we're breaking up?"

That actually made the Justern pause, as it looked at Harry as if his disease was contagious. "I've never met an insane Parselmouth before," he rasped, stopping in the middle of dodging Harry's spell.

The look on the creature's face had such an odd resemblance to Seamus's face after he saw Hagrid's brother for the first time that Harry couldn't help but laugh.

"Good Merlin!" Moody said off the side, everyone having stopped casting spells as soon as they saw that the various curses had no reaction. "The boy's gone insane!"

"No, I'm no--" Harry disagreed, but paused as he remembered, Melinda, a seventh year Hufflepuff, who had been eerily like Seamus, at least in her desire to make all things rum.

In fact...Harry recalled seeing Piers Polkiss dressed as a mummy one Halloween several years ago, providing a wonderful target to the hose Harry had found lying out. Wondering if the same thing would apply here, Harry decided to also try making the Justern drunk.

"Dionysus laden!" Harry yelled, and a strong hose-like flood of rum shot out of his wand, completely drenching the creature who was definitely unhappy with Harry's continued existence.

Dripping wet and slightly unsteady, the Justern charged at Harry, who smirked maliciously and said, "Incendio."

The creature howled in pain as it caught on fire, made possible by the alcohol it was covered in, the smell of smoldering flesh soon filling the hallway. Harry grinned but held his wand out still, which proved wise as the Justern kept charging at him with his dying strength, until it finally collapsed in front of Harry.

"Behold!" Harry said pompously. "The mysterious power of rum!"

There was a stunned silence as every looked at the smoking remains on the floor and then each other, before staring at Harry.

Harry glared back, before jumping to his feet. Feeling vindictive, Harry decided that, regardless of his knowledge of Light healing spells, the Dark ones he knew would be more appropriate.

"Gissinaj," he muttered, pointing his wand at approximately where his broken rib was. The resulting jarring clack and flash of pain made him stumble slightly, but he shook it off and pointed his wand at his shoulder which was either dislocated or had a twisted muscle.

"Clannsis." The shoulder snapped back into its joint and Harry clenched his jaw to stop an exclamation that he had learned from Hermione, Hermione, no less.

"Alright, already," James yelled. "We get the point. Dark magic is a resource. Blah blah blah, don't judge..."

Harry smirked, "So glad you're capable of understanding subtlety. So... what can I help you lot with?"

"Well, we were here to help, but..." Lily said uncertainly, but Harry rolled his eyes.

"Despite popular vote, and appearance, more likely that not, I do know what I'm doing--"

"And that, of course, is why you didn't even know the damned thing's name," Snape agreed sarcastically, kicking the smoldering heap to see if it was still alive.

"The name is not important. I killed it, didn't I?" Harry shot back. "I'm afraid you won't find any potions ingredients left in it, but if you'll excuse me, the basilisk is still around here, and as lovely as it is talking to you prejudiced 'fighters for the light' is, there's a...snake...loose..."

Harry slowly cut off, staring emptily at the ground.

Right before he crumpled onto it, his eyes lifeless and his hand clutching the three scratches across his arm.

Chapter 9: Side-Effects of Mind-Delving

He burst into the Room of Requirement. He had lost something vitally important, and if it would be anywhere, it would be here.

Sure enough, a trunk sat in the middle of the room, as if waiting for him to come and claim his missing belonging. He raced towards it and threw back the lid, hurriedly shifting past odd containers and half-full potion vials, books and brooms, newspapers and cracked inkpots...

Ah ha! He caught a small glimpse of what he was looking for, though he wasn't quite sure what it was himself. Perhaps his missing Sneakoscope, if he had ever had one. No, he had seen something that looked like a white feather and thought for an incredulous second that a snowy owl - 'Hedwig,' a voice in his head supplied - had somehow gotten lost in this seemingly bottomless trunk.

He reached forward to grab the tantalizing white object, and fell all the way in, cutting a path down through the miscellaneous stuff gathered by the Room, until he hit the ground, jarringly sudden.

He looked around at his surroundings in wonder. He saw a photo of a spacey blonde girl and a teen with black scruffy hair, walking aimlessly around the Lake, throwing lollipops on the surface of a large lake to seemingly tempt out some sort of creature.

He saw a witch with bushy brown hair and a wizard with red hair and a long nose, both sitting in the Library. The girl with a heavy text in front of her, biting her bottom lip as her eyes devoured the text, and the redhead, ignoring the book in front of him, leaned forward and blew into her ear, who shivered and sent a death glare at the redhead next to her, before her expression softened and she threw a crumpled piece of parchment at him.

There was a picture of a brown-haired wizard with a red and gold symbol on his robes and a nervous grin on his face dancing with a redheaded girl in the middle of a empty Quidditch pitch in the dead of night...Another of an older (though not very much so) witch with pink spiky hair talking with a gray- and brown-haired wizard before her

eyes widened and she ran off to respond to an Auror call...A dark wizard with red eyes blasting open a doorway to a Muggle household...A man with ragged black hair and haunted eyes, falling in slow motion into a stone archway...

The pictures slowly changed, until they contained completely different people...A redheaded witch with blazing eyes chasing a stag down a hill...A girl with auburn hair and green eyes sneaking through a hallway with a tape recorder in hand...A group of four wizards--two with black hair and two with brown hair, grinning gleefully at a hook-nosed man with green hair...The same red-eyed wizard, though more human in appearance, aiming a beam of chilling green light at a family...A scarred, black-haired teenager, yelling at a room full of adults...

Was that him? He didn't know... It seemed almost as if he had been in this room, under the heaping trunk, forever...

"So?" Madam Pomfrey asked impatiently. "What was it?"

"Apparently," Remus said hesitantly, having drawn the short straw and being forced to act as mediator between the Mediwitch and everyone else, "the claws contained some sort of hallucinogen that knocked him out."

The witch glared at him. "A creature that injects people with poison that makes them delirious is just floating around the school? And no one noticed beforehand?"

"Erm, well, there's some debate about if Collins actually opened whatever place the Justern was in...I'll leave now," Sirius, had poked his head in to see if Remus was still alive, quickly left again.

"How is he?" Remus asked, looking a bit guilty at the pale and motionless teenager on the only occupied bed. Collins had yet to move after collapsing to the ground, and the werewolf couldn't help but wonder if they had gotten there earlier, he wouldn't have been slashed by the creature.

"Physically?" The witch responded. "Just fine. Better actually. That Dark spell of his actually healed his rib better than any potion or spell I know. Not that I ever admitted such a thing," the nurse added sardonically and Remus grinned.

"Don't worry. Your horrible betrayal to the Light is safe with me."

"Thanks, Remus," the mediwitch rolled her eyes. "However, mentally, he's stuck in some sort of dream world, where his thoughts keep changing too quickly for me to get a lock on his consciousness and bring him back. Merlin knows I wouldn't want to be trapped in my memories, let alone his."

Remus nodded, "Thanks, Poppy. Now it's time to go kill all my friends, though. 'Being a Parselmouth...what a horrible thing to have! Eek! Oh no!'" Lupin left while still mocking them in a muttered voice.

He quieted though, when he saw Holly standing outside the door with a stubborn look on her face.

"Two options," the girl declared. "You tell me what's going on, or I investigate myself, eavesdropping on everyone and tracking the recent uses of magic to wherever Collins was injured at. Your choice."

Remus sighed in despair. What next... 'No,' his mind cut off suddenly. 'Don't even tempt Fate. Time to go knock on wood.'

"Fine," he said out loud, "you might as well join the discussion. You have as much to contribute as anyone else, I suppose."

Holly grinned in success. "Oh good. Rose is coming, too." She shifted to the side so Remus could see the ten-year-old standing behind her sister and smiling sweetly.

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"I take no responsibility for this!" Remus exclaimed as soon as he entered Dumbledore's office, pointing to the two trailing girls. "Not my fault!"

Lily glared at the two who had the sense to at least act ashamed. "And what," she asked in a stressed tone, "are you lot doing here?"

"I told Uncle Remus that he could tell me what was going on, or I'd find a more dangerous way to figure it out, Rose probably followed me all the way," Holly answered as if it were obvious, and Snape couldn't completely stifle a snicker.

"Fine!" Lily said throwing her hands up in the air before turning to James and poking his shoulder. "Tell your daughter to not threaten Remus anymore."

"My daughter?" James responded, poking her back. "What do you mean--she's half yours!"

Albus cleared his throat. "Perhaps Remus can give us an update now?"

Lily and James subsided, still poking at each other discretely.

"Apparently he's stuck in some type of coma caused by the hallucinogen. Poppy said something else, but I'm under oath not to mention it," the werewolf responded with a semi-straight face at the end, knowing full well that the Mediwitch would be hounded until she admitted what she said. "Which, from a purely tactical angle, isn't good since he's the only who knows where the Chamber is."

Albus nodded his head in agreement before a small chime announced an incoming Floo. Everyone in the office cast Disillusioning Charms on the person next to them, and Albus checked to make no one was visible before turning to the fireplace.

"Ah, hello, Under Secretary Fudge, how can I be of service?" The headmaster greeted in a tone that, while polite, would have made it obvious to a brick wall that he was in no mood for trivialities.

Unfortunately, Fudge was thicker than said brick wall. "The three who accompanied Minister Crouch today decided that, while your school is in fine standing, the Assistant Professor Collins requires a more in-

depth interview by the Ministry, so I'm here to schedule an appointment. If he is not currently occupied, perhaps he could suggest a date and time?"

Albus paused momentarily, trying to come up with a story, before just deciding to use his power as Headmaster to act offended by the Ministry's desire to double-check his employees.

"I would suggest, Undersecretary," Dumbledore said in a slightly colder tone, "that you remind this group of Hogwarts's independence from Ministry regulations, and that Mr. Collins has no need to meet with anyone for a second opinion on his ability to teach. Good evening."

Dumbledore snapped off the connection and turned back to the main part of his office. "Interfering bureaucrats," he muttered as everyone took off their charms.

"Anyway," Remus continued as if there hadn't been an interruption, "Madam Pomfrey doesn't know how to snap him out of it."

"Bucket of water," Sirius whispered to Peter, but Remus overheard anyway.

"Dare you," he said with a feral smile as Sirius paled, then grinned.

"Alright. Do you dare me to suggest it, or actually throw a bucket of water on him?"

"The latter," Remus, Peter and James said at the same time, and Lily looked at everyone else with a despairing glance.

"Why me?" She asked rhetorically. "What did I do to get stuck with them?"

Sirius looked at Dumbledore with a pleading expression with his eyes darting towards the fireplace.

Albus looked sternly at the Auror. "Fireplaces are not toys," he said severely, then relented. "But go ahead. If Poppy asks, I wasn't here, and had nothing to do with it."

Sirius rubbed his hands together in mischievous glee before silently disappearing into the green flames.

Dumbledore tapped an empty portrait with his wand that changed to show the interior of the Hospital Wing, which currently showed a motionless Collins and Sirius conjuring a bucket full of water. Madam Pomfrey was nowhere in sight.

There was a pause as everyone held their breath and Sirius Levitated the bucket slowly in order to increase the drama.

"SIRIUS BLACK!"

The would-be bucket-thrower deflated in disappointment as Madam Pomfrey ran up to him, banishing the bucket as she did so. Then he realized the danger he was in (facing an irate witch who knew thousands of poisons and the most horrible cures possible) and ran for the fireplace, making it just in time.

"Dumbledore's office!" He gasped out, and as soon as the green flames spat him out at his destination, the Dog Animagus ran for cover on the opposite side of the room just in case Poppy decided to take pursuit.

"Didn't work?" Peter asked dryly, and Sirius glared before grinning. "No, just a...minor setback..."

"So," Professor McGonagall had arrived some time during the short meeting, "does anyone know where the Basilisk is?"

"Actually," Lily said, huddled around a map of Hogwarts with Holly looking discretely over her shoulder, "that corridor may be our best bet. There's no other place I could think of, except for the Slytherin common room. Though if there was a basilisk, I hesitate to ask why Slytherin would want it able to get into his House."

"You won't find much there," a high-pitched voice said from one corner of the office, and a ghost floated through the wall. "It wouldn't do you much good anyway, since only a Parselmouth can get in."

All the living people in the office looked at the ghost with varying expressions. Some, like Holly, Rose, and almost all of the professors had similar looks of annoyance and self-pity. The Marauders, on the other hand, shared looks of mischievous glee, while Dumbledore watched the spirit encouragingly.

"Good day, Myrtle," the Headmaster said genially. "What did you mean by that?"

"Well, even I could figure out that Salazar Slytherin would only let his chamber be accessed by a Parselmouth. If he didn't, every horrible Slytherin would try to get into it."

"And how would a Hufflepuff such as yourself know anything, seeing as how you at least have the courtesy to stay out of most of the castle?" Snape asked in a sneer usually reserved for all things Weasley-twinish, not appreciating the slight against his Slytherins.

Myrtle's eyes filled with tears, and Holly and Lily muttered a barely audible, "Oh, here we go..."

"I came here to try and help - sniff - and this is the thanks I get!" She bawled. "Why don't you just mention the fact that I'm dead and be done with it!"

"Myrtle?" Peter asked kindly, and the ghost turned to him, her tears calming. "Yes?"

"You're dead."

Myrtle burst into tears, and throwing a fist through Pettigrew's stomach, flew out of the room, weeping about people not accepting help from spirits.

"So...anyone want to go look at that hallway?"

Everyone turned to Holly incredulously, so she shrugged and scooted back out of the spot light.

The place was just as miserable as it had been the first time. The old portrait of the malicious queen looked dismissively at them once more.

"You're back again, are you?" She sniffed, looking at the five or so who had been chosen to investigate the place. "I can't imagine why. There's nothing to see, and you bring in you flashy lights and mudblood selves... I don't suppose any of you happen to be pureblood, aye?"

Looking around hesitantly, both Sirius and James stepped forward.

"Oh good, good," the witch cried happily, clapping her hands together. "Proper magical folk: a Potter and a Black. I'll give you the tour properly then, eh? Degradis!"

The portrait shrieked the name in such a piercing tone that Sirius clapped his hands over his ears and complained about flashbacks of listening to his mother screech.

A frazzled-looking butler with a fluffy white mustache appeared, looking at the group with large bloodshot eyes.

"Yes, you old hag?" He said respectfully, while scribbling on a large piece of parchment. The butler held it up and showed thick, black letters spelling 'HELP!'

"Yes, I want you to show these marvelous people around. Make sure not to miss anything," she added with a particularly evil grin, and by a general silent consensus everyone pulled out their wands. Just in case.

"Certainly, you ancient, arthritic banshee," he said bowing, and beckoned everyone forward, ignoring the surprised (and amused) looks as he stepped into an adjoining portrait.

"Well, don't just stand there," the witch said, once more all smiles, though there was a decidedly sadistic gleam in her eyes. "Move along, move along."

Nobody moved.

"Well, does anyone want to go first?" Remus asked, lifting his lighted wand higher and peering down the corridor full of rodent bones and scowling portraits with dead-looking eyes.

"Not me."

"Not a chance."

Remus looked at Peter and Moody, who hadn't spoken, and they both shook their heads.

"Not likely, laddie," Moody said. "If they got some plan ready for us, then I'm not going in first."

"It seems unlikely that there is any entrance down here," Peter said in a questioning tone, and everyone else nodded. "After all, ghosts know this place better than anyone else, right?"

The other four nodded once more and they all walked quickly in the opposite direction, not seeing the disgruntled butler pick up a steak knife and charge at the witch in the portrait.

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"You want us to what!"

Dumbledore sighed as Minerva McGonagall looked severely at him, her lips in a thin line. Sitting next to her was Severus Snape, who looked none too happy with the situation either.

They were in the Hospital Wing as others investigated the passage near the Hufflepuff area, and another group researched Salazar Slytherin and Basilisks. Trying to find a way to cure Chris Collins,

they were having no luck finding any charms or potions that would help.

"Once he's awake," Madam Pomfrey had said, "he'll be fine. All it'll take is a couple days and some potions. But someone else has to figure out how to wake him up. Preferably someone who has experience as a Mind Healer."

Dumbledore explained his idea one more. "You and Severus are both Legilimency-proficient, so it seems logical that you two would be able to enter his mind and bring him back out." He correctly interpreted Minerva's look and answered her unspoken question. "I would do it myself, my dear, but I only know enough Legilimency to get along."

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Of course you don't Albus, like you would overlook the opportunity to learn any Mind Magics. Besides," she continued with her previous argument, "Poppy said only someone with Mind Healer experience could help him. I'm not sure about Severus, but I certainly am no Mind Healer."

"Don't look at me," Severus commented in agreement. "I'm just the Death Eater."

Madam Pomfrey looked up from a pile of parchment on her desk. "I don't like playing havoc with my patients," she said, glaring at Dumbledore, "but the idea has merit. I believe that you two should at least try it. At the very least you could find out the location of that Chamber."

Minerva stared at her incredulously. "Whose side are you on, Poppy?"

The mediwitch sniffed angrily. "I'm on the side of not having a bunch of Petrified people in my Hospital, Minerva!"

Muttering about reckless plans and entering Gryffindor minds, Severus pulled out his wand and pointed at Collins, deciding not to waste anymore time arguing. Besides, any Potions Master would never turn down the opportunity for fresh Basilisk ingredients...

"Legilimens," he cast, and encountered a stone wall where he expected to find, at best, a flimsy shield. He pushed on the Occlumency shield and was forcefully thrown backwards, falling out of his chair and ungracefully onto the ground.

Snape opened his eyes to see Minerva and Poppy trying their hardest not laugh. "Not good at Occlumency," Severus said in a mocking tone. "As soon as he wakes up, he definitely had better have a good story about this!"

Minerva shook her head at the irate Potions Professor. "And here I thought no one could fool you, Severus." She didn't leave a chance for him to sneer a reply. "Together on three?"

"Together on three," he agreed, standing and pointing his wand once more at Collins.

"One...two...three! Legilimens!" They said together, and the Hospital Wing disappeared from view, replaced by the stone wall that Snape had seen before.

"This is Professor Minerva McGonagall, Collins," McGonagall said in her sternest tone, yelling loudly at the wall. "You still stop this foolishness and bring down this Occlumency wall immediately! Do you understand me?"

Severus looked at Minerva in disbelief. "Do you honestly expect that to work?"

"No," she responded with a shake of her head, "but it's worth a try."

They watched the wall slowly shrink into itself as it responded to Minerva's demand, looking somehow like a misbehaving student. Then it seemed to shake itself and stand straight once more.

Minerva bristled and tapped her wand angrily against her hand. "Now, Collins, or so help me..."

The wall shrank back into itself until it disappeared completely with a barely audible huff of annoyance.

"I can't believe that actually worked," McGonagall said, stepping forward before the shield went up again.

"Well, what do you know... even unconscious minds are afraid of you, Minerva," Severus drawled, and stumbled slightly on the suddenly uneven ground.

Minerva bit back a laugh. "I believe that this unconscious mind doesn't appreciate being called afraid of anything."

Done needling each for the moment, they looked around at their surroundings, which, being accessed for another reason than just to look for memories, looked rather than different the average experience. To their far left was a replica of Hogwarts, with its lake, Quidditch Pitch, and Forbidden Forest, though it seemed skewed from the actual one. Minerva couldn't exactly place how it was different though. To the right was a door that was left ajar.

In general consensus both headed for the door.

Severus opened it and saw a mostly empty room that just contained a trunk. The two stepped closer, and, unwilling to approach it, Severus pointed his wand at it. "Alohomora."

The lid creaked open, and McGonagall peered in.

"What in the world..." she muttered, and knelt down to begin pushing through everything. "I honestly hope Collins isn't really this disorganized. Really!"

Severus began looking through the belongings helter-skelter in the trunk. "A homework planner?" He asked incredulously, holding up the offending agenda. "Oh, that's just sad..."

He opened it up and heard a voice squeak, "Finish your homework so your knowledge is not stunted, and then you can do whatever you wanted!" Cringing at the peppy message, he flipped to the inside of the cover and read, 'Happy Christmas, Chris! OWLs are coming up, so you'd better get studying! Hermione.'"

"No wonder Collins is insane. Granger got him a homework planner for Christmas," he commented, tossing it aside.

Minerva glared at him. "There's nothing wrong with being organized, especially for OWLs, Severus."

He ignored her comment and started rooting through the trunk again. "A cheap Sneakoscope--how did he get a hold of a Hippogriff feather?--a spare wand..."

Severus quickly dropped it as it turned into a rubber chicken and ran away squawking. "The Weasley twins," he growled, and Minerva nodded.

"They were always good at Transfiguration, even if they never applied themselves to the actual material. What else is in here? A couple Defense Against the Dark Arts texts, quills, broken ink pots, and a Potions essay. A 'T,' Severus? Honestly, you always tormented my Gryffindors..."

"Are you blaming me for the actions of my counterpart?" Severus asked indignantly before stopping his random search through the trunk. "This would be so much easier if we knew what we were looking for, or Collins had a map for his mind."

With a small pop a map appeared on the ground beside him. He picked it up and saw a large dot labeled, "You are here." The only path on the map was one that led back to where the wall was, with an unsubtle label saying, "Exit."

"Oh, great," Severus grumbled, throwing the map towards Minerva. "That was incredibly helpful."

Minerva was still studying the map, which, to Severus' annoyance, seemed to show her more. With an exclamation of triumph, she ran towards one of the walls and leaned up against it, a rough, wooden door appearing. She opened it without another thought, and a howling wind shot through the room, pulling both people through the door and into the blackness inside of it.

There was a hair-raising yowl to the left in the blackness, and a high squeak immediately after. They heard a dull rumble of a yelling voice some distance ahead, but neither could distinguish what was being said. A fireplace flew by, with a short-fingered hand trying to reach for something, as three teens ran away from it. It flew by before Minerva could identify them, only to be replaced with a snapshot of a giant chessboard.

They stumbled through the pulling darkness, and landed heavily on the ground.

Severus sat up and looked around, his wand pulled out in case of danger. They were in some sort of cave, like stark catacombs: several winding tunnels led away from their current positions.

He turned around and saw the person he and Minerva were sent to find.

"Collins?" He asked, and got a lazy nod in reply.

Collins was leaning against one of the cave walls, unconcernedly flipping through a book.

"Mr. Collins!" Minerva snapped, annoyed at his lack of reply.

"Yeah?" He asked, not even bothering to look up. "If you don't mind, I'm reading here..."

As if feeling the combined death glares of the two professors, the teen finally looked up, and, like the replica of Hogwarts they had both seen, he was different as well.

Dressed in a rather unkempt school uniform, he was wearing glasses and had a posture of complete unconcern. Rather than having dark green eyes, he had fuzzy gray ones.

"Collins?" McGonagall asked, a bit surprised at the differences in him.

"Yes, again, that's my name," he said blandly, putting his book aside and popping his fingers. "Now, what can I help you with?"

"You can help by actually returning to consciousness," Severus snapped, and to his annoyance Collins rolled his eyes.

"Can't help you there, I'm afraid. Especially since I'm not the one you're looking for." Ignoring the resulting confused expressions he got, he stood and floated to one of the tunnel entrances, rather than actually walking.

"What are you?" Minerva asked, seeing that that poison in the justern's claws had odder effects than they previously thought.

"A side of a personality, a kind of spirit, actually," Collins responded lazily, still waiting by the tunnel. "So are you coming or not? I have better things to be doing..."

Minerva and Severus looked at each other, both sharing the thought that the spirit probably didn't have better things to be doing, but followed it anyway.

"Lumos," Minerva muttered as the darkness of the cave thickened, and her light showed multiple sub-entrances to other tunnels. She looked at them curiously, her light not able to reach very far into them. "What are down there?"

"Memories," the spirit responded. "None that you're supposed to go down, however."

After receiving that crisp and short answer, Minerva mutely followed the spirit, ignoring Severus's smirk at her curiosity.

They had passed about fifteen more tunnels when the lazy spirit stopped. "Go down there, please," it said pointing, and the two looked at the musty entrance doubtfully.

"I thought we weren't supposed to go down these," Severus said snidely, mocking the spirit's earlier words.

"You're supposed to go down that one," it replied, yawning and leaning up against another wall. "If you're searching for something, I suggest you go forward."

"What if we decide to stop looking and go back?" Minerva asked, just in case.

"Then you'll just have to change your decision, and keep looking anyway, since you can't go back," the spirit answered without concern. It began to float away as Minerva and Severus glared after it. "If you ever do come back, at least have the courtesy to find your own way. People thinking I have nothing better to do than lead them around..."

Minerva looked at Severus questioningly. "I don't know about you, but I haven't seen Collins act like that. It can't possibly be part of his personality."

Severus thought about her question before answering without sarcasm. "It's just a small part of it, probably, and enhanced to the extreme to fill the whole personality of a person. There's probably quite a few of those spirits running around here." He ignored Minerva's grin and comment of a completely snarky Collins beating him in a sarcasm contest. Like anyone could ever beat his wit. "We should probably do as the spirit advised and go through the memory. You never know if it might be useful."

"If you say so," Minerva said uncertainly, and they both stepped into the tunnel.

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They appeared in Dumbledore's office, though no one was present except for the portraits pretending to sleep, not even Fawkes.

Then there was a flash of an incoming Portkey, and Chris appeared, looking about a year younger than the one they knew.

His school uniform was torn a couple places and he looked like he had been in a battle, with a couple scratches on his face and scuffed-

looking glasses on his face. His expression was a mixture of anger and grief, though he looked mostly in shock, making Minerva think perhaps he was just in a battle, probably the first he had ever been in.

The Portkey fell to the floor, a golden head that looked suspiciously like the one on the statue in the Ministry plaza, and Collin's face twisted as he looked out the window as dawn crept forward.

All three of the people in the office jumped as the oily voice of Phineas Nigellus suddenly spoke.

"Ah...Chris Collins...And what brings you here in the early hours of the morning?" The portrait asked, yawning and stretching. "This office is supposed to be barred to all but the rightful headmaster."

A brief look of savage victory crossed the portrait's face, shared by the other listening paintings.

"Or has Dumbledore sent you here? Oh, don't tell me...another message for my worthless great-great-grandson?"

Collin paled at the question, and didn't answer. Minerva quickly thought through her long-ago project over magical family trees. Nigellus's great-great-grandson...that was Sirius Black.

She shared a glance with Severus, and knew he had reached the same conclusion.

They both stopped going over wizarding family history as Collins suddenly bolted towards the office door, the look of grief taking over most of his face. He grabbed the doorknob, but it wouldn't open. A flash of anger crossed the young wizard's face, and he yanked savagely on the doorknob once more.

Minerva glared in remembrance of this trick of Albus's, locking his office door until whoever he had just angered calmed down and was able to speak and think rationally. The Headmaster had once done that to her, and her reaction hadn't been pleasant. Luckily the door had been resistant to a great number of flaming charms.

Another portrait spoke up as Collins continued to try to force the door open. "I hope this means that Dumbledore will soon be back with us?"

'Back with us?' Minerva thought with raised eyebrows. 'Why had Dumbledore ever left?'

But Chris nodded mutely, obviously not in the mood for conversation.

But the portrait didn't seem to get the hint, settling itself in a grandiose chair and warming up for conversation. "Dumbledore thinks very highly of you," the red-nosed wizard continued, not noticing Collins's hands clench tightly on the doorknob, though not to try and open it. "Oh yes. Holds you in great esteem."

The teen shrank against the door as if trying to sink through the wood itself, an expression of desperation crossing his face. 'Do I know that feeling!' Minerva thought bitterly, but paid attention once more as a fireplace burst into green flames and Dumbledore stepped in.

The portraits clapped joyfully at his appearance, and Minerva wondered once more why Dumbledore had been gone long enough to make stuffy portraits clap at his return.

"Thank you," the old wizard said softly, who, in contrast, didn't look like he had been in a battle at all. He plucked a baby Fawkes out of his pocket and placed the phoenix beneath his perch and onto the pile of ashes there.

"Well, Chris," Dumbledore said lightly, in the tone that nearly drove all the staff to grind their teeth together at his impeccable calm. "You'll be pleased to hear that none of your fellow students are going to suffer lasting damage from the night's events."

Collins looked down guiltily, and Minerva glared at the Headmaster. "He's actually blaming a fifteen-year-old for a battle?" She asked Severus in an angry tone, obviously planning to yell at Albus for his counterpart's actions.

"Wait, Minerva," Severus said sharply. "Just listen."

She huffed in response but calmed down and listened.

"Madam Pomfrey is patching everyone up now," the headmaster continued without pause, seemingly not noticing the increasingly guilty look in Collins's eyes. "Nymphadora Tonks may need to spend a little time in St. Mungo's, but it seems she will make a full recovery."

Collins nodded at the carpet, and Minerva saw Albus look at him sympathetically. "I know how you're feeling, Chris," he said.

"No, you don't." Minerva jumped at the concrete answer. She had expected a whisper or a mutter at best. Collins's eyes blazed angrily now, rather than be filled with self-loathing.

"You see, Dumbledore?" Nigellus spoke up suddenly, and Severus rolled his eyes at the portrait's comment. "Never try to understand the students. They hate it. They would much rather be tragically misunderstood, wallow in self-pity, stew in their own--"

"That's enough, Phineas," Dumbledore cut across, and the portrait subsided.

Collins had turned to look out the window during this short exchange, staring at the Quidditch Pitch with a lost expression.

"There is no shame in what you're feeling," Dumbledore tried again. "On the contrary...the fact that you can feel pain like this is your greatest strength."

Severus raised an eyebrow at that. "This won't end well," he muttered to Minerva. "He should know better than to try this philosophy discussion with an obviously angry student. He'll never learn..."

Minerva frowned in agreement, and watched as Collins began to tremble slightly in anger. His glare was powerful enough to melt the faraway Pitch. "My greatest strength is it?" He repeated mockingly. "You haven't got a clue... You don't know..."

"What don't I know?" And Minerva winced as Collins obviously took that tone of voice as patronizing, something she had often done as well.

He spun around in anger, eyes snapping. "I don't want to talk about how I feel, all right?"

"Chris, suffering like this proves that you are still a man! This pain is part of being human--"

"Then I don't want to be human!" Chris yelled angrily, grabbing a nearby silver instrument and throwing it against a wall, where it broke apart irreparably. The portraits objected angrily, but Minerva whooped in triumph. Albus had always protected his delicate instruments whenever Minerva was in his office, because of the few times she objected rather strongly to his decisions, and she had never succeeded in breaking one yet. Apparently, this Dumbledore hadn't had time to cast protective spells on his office, or had underestimated Collins's temper.

"You do care," Dumbledore continued, and Minerva paid attention the memory once more. "You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it."

"I--DON'T!" Collins yelled back, his voice cracking in agony, and as he faced the old wizard Minerva saw a murderous gleam in his eye.

"Albus had better run," She muttered, and she saw Severus nod in agreement.

"Oh yes, you do," Albus argued back, having not been able to hear Minerva's advice. "You have now lost your mother, your father, and the closest thing to a parent you have ever known. Of course you care."

"You don't know how I feel!" Collins yelled back in defiance once more. "You--standing there-- you--"

The two watched as the angry fire died from his eyes and he ran towards the door once more. The doorknob still refused to budge.

"That won't work," Minerva muttered as Collins's hand clenched around his wand as if preparing to blast through the door. But the teen spun around and glared at Dumbledore straight in the eyes.

"Let me out," he demanded coldly.

"No."

Minerva stared at the Headmaster in the memory. Surely Albus wouldn't be so cruel... not letting someone go to grieve, to catch on to the realization that they lost someone as close as Albus had said...

"Let me out," Collins said again, slightly less calmly than before.

"No."

"If you don't--if you keep me in here--if you don't let me--" The implied threat of imminent destruction was clear in his raging voice, but Dumbledore paid no heed.

"By all means continue destroying my possessions. I daresay I have too many," Dumbledore said in a serene tone, and Collins growled quietly in response.

"Let me out!"

"Not until I've had my say," Albus said, taking a seat calmly behind his desk, though Minerva was inclined to think that the old wizard finally got some common sense and saw the wisdom in putting the wooden desk between himself and Collins.

"He's not going to listen to a word out of your mouth, you senile old wizard!" McGonagall yelled in sympathetic anger, just as Collins yelled, "I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU'VE GOT TO SAY! I don't want to hear anything you've got to say!"

"You will," Dumbledore replied, as Severus glared at Minerva to be quiet. "Because you're not nearly as angry with me as you ought to be. If you are to attack me, as I know you are close to doing..."

"That's right he is," Minerva growled, ignoring Severus sigh of self-pity of having to associate with Gryffindors. "...I would like to have thoroughly earned it."

"What are you talking--?" Collins asked in angry contempt.

"It is my fault he died," Dumbledore said clearly.

And the two were yanked out of the memory as Dumbledore continued talking.

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Minerva closed her eyes until her sense of balance was restored.

"What was that!" She yelled in anger, obviously incensed at the memory. "He--"

"That was a rather ungraceful landing," a laughing voice said above her.

She looked up to see Chris Collins on a broomstick, looking down at her and Severus in amusement.

"Wonderful," Severus said snidely as he stood and stiffly brushed off his robes, "yet another personality of Collins. Are you sure you not the same person, just with Multiple Personality Disorder?"

Collins laughed clearly, and looked at them with cheerful yellow eyes. "Same snarky git as always, Snape?" he asked, swooping to a landing upside-down. "That's to be expected, I suppose."

Minerva looked around and saw that they were still in the cavern-like tunnels. "Are you supposed to lead us somewhere?" She asked Collins. "I thought we would be out of these tunnels by now."

"You're probably going to be in them for a while," Collins said. "But why are you here in the first place? Are you looking for a specific memory, or just exploring my mind?"

"We're looking for a specific memory, and trying to find a way to wake you up," Severus answered, searching the immediate area for differences in the tunnels. "You wouldn't happen to know the quickest way to do that, would you?"

"Not a clue!"

"Of course, not, lousy Gryffindor," he muttered. "You better lead us to wherever we're supposed to go next, then."

Collins laughed again, but obediently swooped off down a tunnel to the left. "Am I supposed to know where you go next?"

"You have a better idea than we would," Minerva replied, cutting off Severus's remark.

"I might as well show you something fun, then," Chris decided with a shrug, and, leaping gracefully off his broom, beckoned the two to follow him.

"What memory are you looking for?" The yellow-eyed spirit asked. "I hardly think you're looking for memories of me bothering Lockhart, but there's a couple good strategy memories scattered around here."

"We're looking for the Chamber of Secrets memory," Minerva answered, thinking that this was not so much 'mind-reading' as it was searching through a catalogue.

Collins paused, his eyes focusing on something neither Minerva nor Severus could see, before frowning slightly.

"I can't take you there, strangely enough. I can only show a couple years worth of memories, and that's not one of them. So," he continued, resuming his fast walk, "how'd you two get in here anyway?"

"Legilimency," Severus said shortly, annoyed that the simple task of viewing a memory had turned into this.

"Well, that's not good. I suppose you've figured out that I'm rather good at Occlumency then?" He received a glare in answer. "Darn."

And he snapped his fingers, a large cavernous hole appearing under the two professors. They looked at him with startled eyes before they began to fall through the air, soon disappearing into the darkness.

"Good luck!" The yellow-eyed spirit called before leaping onto his broomstick once more and flying happily away.

He paced back and forth in anxiety. Something was missing, but he couldn't quite figure out exactly what. Like he was in a black and white world with only the faintest nagging memory of color.

What could it possibly be?

He looked at the pictures all around him, trying to figure out some small clue. He was fairly certain that he was the one with black hair and green eyes, but wasn't really sure. The wizard in those pictures, while maybe not at peace, had confidence, some sort of identity...

Identity?

The crux of the problem slipped away again. Identity... he didn't think he had ever had one. Was that what was missing? He wasn't sure.

"I am someone," he tried experimentally. The words felt right, but if only he knew who he was. "I am...Chris?"

He said the name, but it didn't feel quite right. He shrugged. The name worked for now even if he felt like something else would work better.

His second challenge was to find a way out of this trunk.

Even though he couldn't think up a memory for sure, the pictures reassured him he hadn't been here forever. So there had to be a way out.

Responding to some deeply entrenched instinct, he began pacing again, though this time parallel to a wall. The third time he passed by the blank stretch, a door appeared.

Sighing with relief, and hoping this doorway would lead to something other than just a way out ('Maybe some answers,' his mind supplied sardonically), he yanked open the door and ran through, only pausing to grab some pictures that he felt were important.

The picture of him, a blonde girl, a gangly redhead, and a bushy-haired girl carrying a large encyclopedia.

The picture of an auburn-haired, green-eyed woman carrying a baby and laughed at the antics of two black-haired and two sandy-haired wizards.

The picture of a decrepit mansion, with an ominous-looking graveyard in the foreground, milling with black-robed people.

Maybe he would meet someone who could tell him what they were.

Severus whipped out his wand and cast a cushioning charm on the ground far below them. He knew from prior experience that you couldn't cast spells on yourself while in memories, but everything else was fair game.

The two landed without harm, albeit ungracefully. Standing quickly, they looked around, Severus in impatience and irritation, Minerva in quite a bit of interest.

They were in a hallway of Hogwarts, somewhere down the Charms corridor, but far from any staircases.

"Run!" They heard shouted from far away, and turned in time to see a blonde girl of about fifteen walking sedately down the corridor, giggling all the way and clutching a green-and-silver scarf.

"Lovegood!" Severus sneered, and glared at the witch even though she had no way of seeing him. "What is she doing with a Slytherin scarf?"

His question was never answered, because they saw a slightly younger-looking Collins round the corner, sliding into the wall so he wouldn't hit Lovegood. "Luna! That's not running!"

"What, and miss the show?" She quipped, but they both ran as a full tribe of irritated Slytherin upperclassmen rounded the corner, exclaiming angrily at the sight of the two.

Chris and Luna ran a bit farther down the corridor, but paused to watch the Slytherins huff and puff after running such a distance.

"Give me--back my--scarf!" A pug-faced girl the two professors recognized as Pansy Parkinson panted.

"Why?" Luna asked with obvious curiosity.

"What do you mean why, you loony half-blood?!" Pansy screeched back evidently getting back her breath. She yanked out her wand out and fired a curse, but it encountered a thick opaque wall.

"Now, now, no need for language, Parkinson," Chris said with a grin, but the forming bruise under his eyes said that this was more than just an elaborate prank. "Aren't you Slytherins supposed to be cunning or something?"

Pansy smirked. "We are. I was just the distraction."

Luna and Chris shared a worried glance as they heard the sounds of a large Slytherin herd coming up the corridor behind them. Parkinson put on a simpering self-satisfied smile as they turned back around, but her smile turned into a look of confusion as they showed no sign of worry.

"You don't really think we'd fall for so blunt a trap, do you?" Chris drawled annoyingly, and Luna smiled sincerely.

"The Frawgs warned us about incoming traps, so we enlisted the help of the Gubenschnipers," she commented in a spacey tone, and Parkinson tried to hide her look of disbelief.

"That means we illusioned ourselves, Parkinson," Collins said, speaking slowly as if to a four-year-old. "We're not really here."

The two disappeared, leaving Parkinson screaming in frustration as seven burly Slytherins burst into the corridor, ready for a fight that wasn't going to happen.

Severus and Minerva were whisked away to a different corridor, though this time it was the real two Hogwarts students, not simply illusions.

Luna giggled as she wrapped a green scarf around her neck and shrugged on a silvery jacket. Her actions were mirrored by Collins as he pulled a ridiculous looking hat out of his pocket. "I can't believe Nott really wears this," Chris said in a gleeful tone as he gently pulled it onto Luna's head before putting on a silver jacket himself. "Now we really are Slytherins, m'dear," he said to Luna, who pulled a ridiculously horrified look.

"Oh no! Not that! We'll have to start a bonfire with the Sorting Hat if it refuses to Sort us again!"

"What is this talk about arson?" An amused voice said from in front of them, and a figure stepped out of the shadow.

"Of course we weren't talking about arson, sir," Collins said, a grin that belied that statement on his face. "Never. Us causing trouble? Not even a possibility!"

Dumbledore laughed, and Minerva bit back a comment about how Albus seemed to be a schizophrenic, based on the last memory.

"Mr. Collins, Miss Lovegood, sometimes I worry about you two. Miss Granger took up knitting, Mr. and Miss Weasley took up chess, Mr. Longbottom took up seizing corners of the Gryffindor common room

as a greenhouse. Those are all perfectly normal hobbies. But here are you two, stealing Slytherin scarves and jackets!"

"All for a good cause professor!" Collins said in defense, but Severus muttered disparaging comments just the same.

"Sure, sure," Dumbledore waved his hand airily and began walking on as Chris and Luna continued their run back to some safe house in the castle. "Mr. Collins?" He called back sternly.

"Yes?" He responded in a far too innocent voice.

"You are not allowed to burn neither Professor Snape nor Mr. Malfoy in effigy tomorrow at breakfast!"

"Yes, sir," the voice grudgingly replied, before muttering, "All bets are off at lunch!"

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"That was certainly more pleasant than the last one," Minerva said as they tumbled into the caves once more.

"Pleasant!" Severus growled. "Dumbledore just let them get away with burglarizing Slytherins and plotting arson!"

Minerva rolled her eyes. "Get a grip," she commanded of Severus, only to get a rather rude gesture in response. "really Severus, you're not sixteen. I expected something a little more sophisticated from you."

"As much fun as it is to squabble with someone who has such obviously deplorable wit, might I suggest that we actually do what we came here to do?"

"Oh, and what is that?" Minerva asked. "Wander around in various memories until we find what, exactly? What are the odds that the next spirit thing to show up is actually helpful?"

"Not very high," a hoarse voice said softly, and Minerva jumped in shock. Severus, who had seen something floating down the tunnel beforehand, had an amused smirk on his face, had Minerva bothered to check and see.

The Collins in front of them was different than the other two spirits that had guided them before. While annoying, the two had displayed such obviously teenage emotions that they had somewhat forgotten the other sides of the person they had come to save.

With completely black eyes and a shadowy grim look on his face, this Chris Collins was definitely one you would not want to go up against in a battle. He was wearing a completely Muggle fighting suit, which neither could identify, and was carrying a large assortment of deadly-looking weapons. Besides that, his hands and face were covered in blood, and the spirit was flying at a funny angle that couldn't be called anything else other than a limp.

He quirked an eyebrow at their expressions but made no comment. "Despite that, I know what you're looking for," he said in the same scratchy voice. "So come on, and don't stray to far behind. Things are about to get a little wild."

Severus rolled his eyes. "It's you're mind. Surely you can control it?"

"I would, if it were just mine." The two digested that comment in silence, but a faraway scream interrupted them. Collins smiled bitterly. "Besides, since when can you control your mind in nightmares?"

He walked forward without checking to see if they would follow, but pulled out his wand and a wickedly sharp knife that would make Voldemort himself hesitate.

Severus and Minerva walked cautiously after him, not being able to stop their peering around wildly at every scream or unnerving crash.

"What is that?" Minerva whispered to Collins, not sure if she really wanted to hear the answer.

"Voldemort's many victims," came the reply, and her suspicions about not wanting to know were proven correct. "It's amazing what you can overhear when you can't sleep for all the screams."

Minerva chanced a look at Severus, who was slightly green himself. He hated any references towards what Death Eaters did and what he had to participate in to keep his cover. That one comment in the Hospital Wing was rare.

"Why are you bothering?" Collins hoarse voice broke into her thoughts. "What brings you this far into my psyche to reach this place? Not many do."

"We're supposed to bring you back to the land of the living," Severus said crisply, and Collins nodded sharply.

"Though I did always favor the Land of the Lost," he said, and Snape winced at the Muggle reference. He absolutely hated the rubbish Muggles came up with to entertain themselves. He almost missed the flying shadow that slammed into Collins, only to get stabbed and thrown to the side.

They walked in silence for a bit more until Collins paused near a source of banging.

"This is where I leave you," he said solemnly, looking at the two like he'd never see anyone again. He didn't even wince as the banging escalated. "Good luck."

Minerva barely had time to nod in return before Collins turned and walked away into the darkness.

She turned to see Severus pointing his wand at a door that just appeared and the apparent source of the banging.

"Why," the Potions Master asked with clenched teeth, "did Collins decide to leave us here?"

"Because he's annoying." Minerva answered at once, and got a rare grin in response.

"That he is," Severus responded, and the door burst open.

Chapter 10: Secrets Discovered (And Denied)

He ran through hallways that looked vaguely familiar. Various portraits on the walls exclaimed angrily at his furious pace, but he didn't pay attention. He was almost out. He could feel it...

But he turned one corner and skidded to a halt. A large wooden door blocked his path, one that didn't look prepared to move out of his way. He looked around for inspiration. He sincerely doubted that this door would open to candy names, like Dumbledore's gargoyle.

Dumbledore's gargoyle?

He grasped at the small tidbit of information but it slid away. He knew a Dumbledore, he was certain of that. But who was he?

Shrugging and pushing the problem to the back of his mind, he pulled out a wand that he never remembered owning, and cast a Blasting Hex at the door.

It refused to move.

Gritting his teeth in frustration, he pummeled the door again and again with curses, until it eventually began to buckle. He rammed into it with his shoulder, and tripped through the doorway as the wood unexpectedly gave out completely.

He looked around and saw two people staring at him oddly. Perhaps he knew them?

o--o--o

Holly crept through the castle, hoping no one would notice her absence. After all the work she had gone through to get to a meeting, it really was rather anticlimactic. Sure, Sirius had made a fool out of himself, but no extra effort was necessary to see that!

Her mission now, however, was to get to a room very few people knew about. The house-elves called it the Come-And-Go Room, but Holly called it bloody useful. She had originally used it to create a

potions essay that she really didn't want to write, but she had bigger plans for it this time.

It would create a map to the entrance of the Chamber of Secrets.

It had taken a great deal of work to separate herself from Lily, who was still rather upset she had threatened her way into Dumbledore's office. Luckily, Rose had agreed to distract her, with the promise of Holly owing her a hefty favor.

But all that was beside the point. She looked at the satiric painting of the trolls bashing their would-be dance teacher in amusement before turning to pace in front of a blank stretch of wall.

I need to know where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is...I have to find the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets...How do I get into the Chamber of Secrets...

A door immediately appeared, and she yanked it open.

There was nothing in it.

Muttering a few choice words under her breath, she stepped into the Room anyway, just in case she had missed something small.

There!

She ran for a small piece of parchment on the floor. It was bent in all kinds of complicated folds, and Holly had no idea how it would help her. It didn't have anything written on it, like directions or a map or anything useful...

She looked at the parchment critically. Could it be the infamous Marauder's Map? She had heard her mum arguing about it a couple years ago, but since then it had apparently disappeared and was never mentioned again. She delved into her memories, trying to remember the password to open it.

"I seriously swear I'm up to no good? No, no, they wouldn't have used the word serious. Perhaps 'I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good'?"

She grinned in victory as the ink lines began to criss-cross on the map, and her eyes searched eagerly for any odd passageway. She knew where pretty much all of the other secret passages were, so any that stuck out were immediately suspect.

She sighed in disappointment as no passageways caught her eye. Perhaps there was a way for the Map to show just animals? Surely that would at least show the Basilisk.

"I need to know the way to make it just show animals."

With a pop another piece of parchment with writing appeared.

She looked at it hopefully, but threw it down in disgust as it only had the words, "Not possible."

Now what could she do?

o--o--o

Minerva and Severus stared as the person they had been searching for appeared in front of them.

"Collins?" Minerva asked questioningly, not sure if this just another personality, even though he was walking rather than floating.

"That's what I thought, too," the teenager replied. "But that doesn't seem quite right. Are you sure that's my name?"

Minerva looked at Severus questioningly. "What in the world is he talking about?"

"Amnesia, possibly, Severus replied, "but if he came up with Chris Collins as his name and then decided that that probably wasn't it, he might be suffering from something else."

"Do I know you?" The black-haired teenager cut in. "You look familiar, but I can't think of your names for the life of me."

"I'm Professor McGonagall, and this is Professor Snape," Minerva answered, unsure where this was going. "Are you sure Collins isn't your name?"

"Fairly sure," he replied, thinking about it. "It feels right, but a little off, like a nickname or something..."

Severus growled as he put the clues together. A nickname, no... but a false name. "Chris Collins isn't his real name," he told Minerva, glaring at the teenager in front of him, and hazarded a guess. "Which means most of what he's told us is a lie."

Chris stepped backwards as the force of two glares hit him. "Well, I'm sure I must have had a good reason for doing that... Perhaps I was possessed by James Bond."

Severus winced at another Muggle entertainment reference. "Be that as it may," he ground out, "we now need to find out your identity, find whatever memory you have of the Chamber of Secrets, and then wake you up so I can kill you."

"Hey!" Severus glared impassively at the teenager's indignation. "There's no need for threats now! Especially if you're trying to find one of my memories. Besides what do you need to know about this Chamber of Secrets?"

"Where it is for a start," Minerva said, glaring at Severus to keep him quiet. "And your memory will probably show a good way to defeat the Basilisk."

"Put a sword through it," Chris said with a shrug, then paused. "Where did that come from? What sword was it?" He paced angrily in front of them as if trying to divine the meaning of what he said. "And why not just use the sword on the diary? Ginny suggested that solution when we were talking about it last year...Wait!"

Seeing two other people he had obviously known seemed to jog his memory a bit, though if he thought about anything it slipped away again. He pulled out a picture of six people on it and pointed to the

red-haired witch. "Is that Ginny Weasley?" He asked in a tone as if putting a puzzle together, while still missing vital pieces.

Minerva nodded her head. "The other five are you, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and... I can't recognize the last one. He looks kind of like Frank, don't you think Severus?"

He turned to look at the picture with narrowed eyes. "Neville Longbottom. But wasn't he tortured in your world?"

Chris shook his head. "No?" Sighing with frustration at his uncertainty, he pulled out his other pictures. "Okay, who are these people? They all look very familiar."

"Very familiar? Only you would consider the Dark Lord familiar," Snape said, shaking his head in disgust. "And why are you in a graveyard?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Chris responded in annoyance. "So, who are the others?"

Minerva looked at this picture. "This one has the Marauders and Lily. I think she's holding Holly. No, she's holding Harry! Why did you bring this picture?" She asked, angry at the reminder of her favorite student's dead son.

"It seemed important," Chris answered in an apologetic tone. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"Wait."

They both turned to look at Severus, who was looking back and forth between the picture and Chris. "If Neville Longbottom could still be alive there," he said with an air of dawning comprehension, "then that means Harry Potter could be, too."

"Oh," Chris said with a look of realization on his face.

Then he changed. A spell seemed to lift off of him, and the two suddenly realized that he had a strong resemblance to James Potter, and his eyes couldn't have been from anyone but Lily.

But rather than have the still-young appearance that James still had despite nearing 40, the teenager in front of them looked haunted and haggard, so much so that they could almost see why it was so hard to realize who he was. Harry hardly looked happy about remembering his identity, though. If anything, he looked worried and quite a bit afraid. This impression was proven right as he looked at them with darkened eyes, with a heartfelt, "Oh, shit."

o--o--o

Madam Pomfrey glanced up from her desk to check on her one, no, three patients. Minerva and Severus had been moved to beds along the far wall so they wouldn't fall down in the middle of delving through Collins' mind. The teen himself was still lying motionless on the bed closest to her desk. Satisfied that none of them had conditions change for the worse, she was about to return to her book when she heard muttering.

"That's what I thought, too," Chris said, though still otherwise unconscious. "But that doesn't seem quite right. Are you sure that's my name?"

She stood up in shock and bustled over to his bed. He seemed as if he was still under effect of the Justern's poison, and she crossed her arms to wait and see if he would speak again.

"Do I know you?" She jumped as he spoke again. She had half-imagined that she had simply imagined Chris talking. "You look familiar, but I can't think of your names for the life of me."

There was another pause.

"Fairly sure." She thought that it was slightly unnerving to see Collins speak the words with a confused tone but still having a slack face. "It feels right, but a little off, like a nickname or something..."

She couldn't make sense of this conversation, and assumed vital parts were being spoken by Severus and Minerva. But there was a vague feeling like a revelation was just out of reach. Listening to half of this conversation once more, she pushed the feeling away without realizing it.

"Well, I'm sure I must have had a good reason for doing that... Perhaps I was possessed by James Bond."

Poppy ran back to her office and quickly looked through her potions and medical texts. She was sure she could figure out some way to heal Collins now that she had more information about the side-effects.

Seizing the right book, she ran back into the Wing just in time to hear her patient mutter a phrase that made her cheeks blush pink.

"Really, Mr. Collins," she scolded, even though she knew he couldn't hear her. "Language such as that."

Then she ran out of the Hospital Wing, full tilt towards Dumbledore's office, not hearing the remainder of the conversation.

o--o--o

As soon as he heard the name 'Harry Potter', everything came back to him. Memories rushed into his head, of all the people in the pictures, Hogwarts, the Chamber of Secrets, alternate dimensions, and, most jarring of all, his intense desire to keep his identity to himself.

Harry felt his face pale as he realized that both Snape and McGonagall knew who he was. They would undoubtedly tell the Potters, who would ostracize him as evil, what with his Parseltongue abilities and Dark Magic. Let alone what would happen when Voldemort found out someone from the prophecy was back in the running.

"Oh, shit," he said emphatically as it all came back to him at once.

"A Potter?" Snape repeated in a tone of deep disgust and ill-hidden shock. "Dear Merlin, the world as we know it is over."

McGonagall looked at Harry, and he couldn't take the shock, fear, and distrust in her eyes. "You really are Harry Potter and you didn't think to tell us? Do you know what this news will do to Lily?" Then her eyes widened as she fully realized what Harry had guessed what everyone would: he was Dark, an unknown entity, full of secrets, and surely not worthy of being trusted by anyone in the Order.

"You can't truly be a Potter." She denied in a disbelieving tone. "You're a Parselmouth! You're, you're--"

Harry, who had looked away in full shadow of his own doubts, glared back at her with an icy glare. "Evil is the word you're looking for, I believe."

She looked at him in agreeing horror, and Harry turned away again. He couldn't take this. This was the very reason why he had refused to tell his real identity, and seeing his stern, unflappable Head of House stare at him the way all the students had during his fifth and second year was an experience worse than he could have imagined.

He punched the cave wall in frustration. "You weren't supposed to find out like this!" He said in anger. "You weren't supposed to find out at all!"

He turned to see Snape watching him with a strange expression.

"So you lied the whole time?" The Potions Master asked bluntly, and Harry nodded.

"All of it? Your identity, apparently your blood, as well as everything asked that first night?"

Harry nodded, then shook his head. "Anything you asked about me specifically was a lie," he said in a dead voice. Snape grunted in a way that demanded more information. "Voldemort really did, well, 'die' for thirteen years, I really did resist Veritaserum after being captured

by Voldemort, I don't support that evil snake, and I did use the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange."

"And your lack of Occlumency, which was the reason we trusted you to begin with?"

"Occlumency?" Harry asked in apparent confusion, trying to keep some of his secrets. "I don't know Occlumency. I was actually telling the truth. Why?"

Snape grunted. 'So Potter really didn't know Occlumency,' he thought with some reassurance. But it didn't fit. The shield was there, and it had no mental feeling of the Justern. He narrowed his eyes.

"And I'm sure you'd say that the shield around your mind was just an effect of the Justern poison. Don't even try to lie, Potter."

"Why would I say I didn't know Occlumency if I did? Wouldn't it make more sense to say I knew Occlumency even if I didn't?" Harry argued back, but knew that Snape wouldn't believe him anyway.

"Oh, just liked someone wouldn't label themselves Muggleborn if they were really half-blood?" Came the sarcastic rebuttal.

Harry gave up. "Fine. Yes, I know Occlumency. Happy?"

"Not in the least. The Potter clan just grew by one more member. Another insipid little Gryffindor."

"Actually," Harry said with a bitter grin, "the story about the Hat was true. I was supposed to be in Slytherin, and not just because I could speak to snakes."

Snape glared at him calculatingly, as if evaluating whether or not Harry was worth investigating this claim of Slytherin Houseship, while an endless mantra continued in Harry's head like a ticker tape. 'Everyone will know who I am, I'll lose my family without ever really having it, James and Black are going to kill me...forget it, Snape and Moody are going to kill me, everyone will know who I am...'

McGonagall, meanwhile, seemed to shake off her shock and shakily spoke. "Despite this... revelation... we should probably find a way to wake you up now. Then you can explain more fully what you were thinking when you hid this."

Harry sighed. He wasn't ready to explain his reasoning, which, even in his mind, sounded faulty and full of holes. But besides that feeling, he knew that, somehow, hiding his identity was the best choice. He just couldn't explain why without explaining everything that had ever happened to him.

"Do you want that Chamber of Secrets memory first? I might as show you, since there's no reason to hide it anymore."

"Yes, Potter, that would be a good idea. Finding a way to defeat this mad creature in the castle that only you can speak with is a sound plan. May I congratulate you on such evolved thinking?" Snape had once more become stone-faced, unlike McGonagall who still had an expression of shock on her face. "Now, any background history we should know to this convoluted story?"

"Like what?" Harry sniped back, pushing his anxiety to a far corner of his mind and glaring at Snape's overly patronizing tone. "It wasn't that strange. Well, Lockhart was teaching, and there was that whole thing with Aragog and the Potion, but..."

He got two curious glances in response, which was exactly the reaction he was hoping for.

"Perhaps you can just tell us the basic story when we enter the memory," Snape said, putting his forehead in his hand as if all this was causing him a headache. "Lead on, if you will."

Harry nodded, but stopped in surprise when the caves changed as he stepped forward. Instead of the twisting dark caves, they found themselves in the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts.

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"This wouldn't happen to be the one in the forefront of your mind, would it?" Minerva asked, as if thinking the hope of being back in the real world would be too much.

"No," Harry responded, looking around with interest. "I think we just entered the memory because I thought about it. Hm, that's useful."

Snape, who had been surveying the area with a clinical eye, snapped at Harry. "Do not presume to tell me that the Chamber of Secrets is off the Entrance Hall, Potter. So, where is it?"

"It's on the second floor... but why did we end up here?" Harry thought aloud. "All the teachers are supposed to be in the staff room. Well, except Lockhart, of course. The idiot."

"Lockhart really taught here?" Minerva asked, and if Harry wasn't mistaken, though he hoped he was, there was a bit of adoration in her eyes.

"Oh Merlin," Harry groaned, looking at her in disbelief. "Please don't tell me you're a Lockhart fan." She looked faintly embarrassed now. "You do know that he stole his stories from everyone else, right? The only thing Lockhart could do was a Memory Charm."

Snape smirked at Minerva's expression of distaste. "I think you just destroyed a good ten years of worship, Potter." He stepped out of the way with a look of contempt as Minerva moved to stamp on his foot. "For Merlin's sake, Minerva, are you a witch or not?"

He got a growl in response and Harry laughed. "If you two children will behave," he said, "we might as well hurry so we can witness the fall of your hero, Professor."

Minerva blushed again but obliging followed Harry with Severus beside her.

The school was eerily silent, with no students wandering around and no teachers on patrol for miscreants.

"The Chamber of Secrets was opened on Halloween my second year," Harry said, starting to explain. "If you didn't already know that Voldemort was behind all this, you would know by the sheer cheesiness."

"It opened in your second year?" Minerva repeated.

"Yeah, so be prepared for everyone to look five years younger," Harry grinned, knowing that he and Ron were pretty scrawny so long ago. "The first victim of the Basilisk was Mrs. Norris."

He snickered, not seeing Minerva's look of complete disapproval at his glee. "She wasn't hurt, just Petrified. Then Colin Creevey was Petrified, because he saw the Basilisk through his camera rather than normally."

"I'm sensing a pattern," Severus added sardonically, and Harry nodded. "Justin Finch-Fletchley and Nearly-Headless Nick were next. Justin saw the Basilisk through Nick, but Nick got the full blast."

"But ghosts can't die again." Harry looked back in surprise as both McGonagall and Snape spoke at the same time.

"He turned this odd smoky-black. I never did find out how he was revived. Anyway," Harry continued, as the two looked ready to start debating magical theory, "during this whole thing everyone was freaking out, as I'm sure you could imagine."

"Let me guess," Severus said, his lip curling. "The Slytherins were blamed."

"Wrong!" Harry said, grinning bitterly. "Only Hermione, Ron, and I blamed the Slytherins. Well, Malfoy more specifically." He ignored Severus's scoffing. "No, I was blamed for opening the Chamber."

"They honestly thought you would open the Chamber when you were just twelve years old?"

"The Wizarding World lacks in common sense," Harry said bluntly, and neither of them disagreed. "All of the Hogwarts students saw was

that no one likes Mrs. Norris, I was not particularly fond of Creevey, and everyone thought I had set a snake on Justin before, and so on. In a twisted sort of way, all the clues pointed at me. They also knew I was a Parselmouth, so I was screwed."

"But still," Minerva said, jumping to Harry's defense after declaring him evil just a bit ago. "They didn't honestly think that you could open it!"

"Yeah, well," Harry shrugged. Discussing this had stirred up memories hadn't really analyzed, and old feelings of bitterness and betrayal remained.

They were nearing the staff room. The most difficult thing about walking around in memories, Harry realized, was that the moving staircases didn't realize that anyone was there, so it was necessary to find long backwards passages just to get anywhere.

"Ron and Hermione were still on my side, though. I had been hearing the Basilisk in the walls, and I had no idea what it was. Then everything came to a head on the day of the last Quidditch match. It was about to start when Penelope Clearwater and Hermione were Petrified."

Minerva gasped and Severus scowled, disliking any students being injured, Gryffindor and Ravenclaw or no.

"Hermione's a bleeding genius, though," Harry said smiling at the memory. "Puts Albert Einstein to shame. She was in the Library right before the game, apparently, and figured out that this mysterious creature attacking everyone was a Basilisk."

"How on Earth did she figure that out?" Minerva asked. "Miss Granger surely is intelligent, but still..."

"I always thought she was a Martian," Harry said in explanation, but paused as a thick book on tiny legs ran past, squeaking about Molecular Structure and Pink Rabbits. "Hmm," he muttered, "I thought those only started running around in fourth year."

"She figured it out," Harry continued as the tiny pattering sounds echoed away, "because all the roosters had been killed and spiders ran away from the site of any recent Petrification. Then, and here's the part that's hard to believe, she ripped the page about Basilisks out of a book and wrote 'pipes' beside it."

Snape gasped in mock surprise. "Granger. Defacing a book? Shame!"

This time Minerva's foot met its mark.

"Hermione saw Clearwater as she left the Library, and warned her to look around the corners with a mirror first. Penelope did so, and they were both Petrified by the incoming Basilisk. Ron and I found the paper in her hand, though none of the teachers had."

McGonagall groaned. "Don't tell me you went after the Basilisk yourselves!"

"We didn't," Harry reassured her, with just enough pause before saying, "not yet anyway. We still had no idea where the Chamber was. You know that Hagrid was expelled after supposedly opening it while at school?"

The two nodded.

"The Ministry decided to arrest him, just in case he was opening it this time, too. Ron and I, still trying to find out the entrance to the Chamber, were under my father's Invisibility Cloak in Hagrid's cabin."

A look of badly hidden horror crossed over Minerva's face as she heard this reminder that Harry was a Potter, and he mentally swore.

"Then along comes Lucius Malfoy, of all people," Harry said with a completely unhidden disgust, shoving most of his emotions away, "and says that Dumbledore has been temporarily removed."

He paused for the two outcries that followed this statement. "Surely Crouch wasn't that stupid!" Minerva exclaimed.

"When the Dark Lord disappeared did all rational sense leave with him?" Snape snarled in disgust, and Harry laughed.

"Fudge was the Minister, for one thing, and Lucius Malfoy... well, I'm sure you can guess his motive. If something was Petrifying a Squib's cat, four Muggleborns, and a Gryffindor ghost, he was hardly going to complain."

"What do Hagrid and Dumbledore have to do with finding the entrance?" Minerva asked, trying to get the story back on track.

"Not very much, but when Hagrid left, and he knew Ron and I were there, by the way, he said to follow the spiders."

"Dear Merlin," Severus breathed, having a good idea where this was going.

"Exactly. Ron, who has a great fear of spiders, thought we should ignore the advice. After all, Hagrid had had an illegal dragon in his wooden cabin the year before. But I bullied him into it, and we followed a trail of spiders into the Forbidden Forest."

"You do know, don't you Col--Potter, that it is called the Forbidden Forest for a reason?" Severus asked, and Harry shrugged dismissively.

"Eh, we lived." Harry paused. Dumbledore surely knew. Would anyone else... "Did you know that there is an extremely large nest of Acromantulas in the Forest?"

Here?" McGonagall asked pointlessly in shock. "Acromantulas? But they kill anyone they see!"

"Really?" Harry said sarcastically. "I didn't know that. You didn't happen to lose any students in the forest last year, did you?" He decided to continue his story after being burned by two high-power glares.

"Fine, fine. The Acromantulas summoned their leader, Aragog, who came and talked to us. He said that last time the Chamber was opened, a girl had died in a bathroom, running across the Basilisk. Then, after a whole bunch of trying to tell him Ron and I were friends of Hagrid, they all tried to eat us."

"Why would saying you were friends with Hagrid save you?"

"Because Hagrid raised Aragog," Harry said simply, as if that explained everything.

Strangely enough, it did.

"We escaped in a rather unorthodox fashion, semi-illegally I may add, and then put all the clues together." He paused here.

"Well?" Minerva asked impatiently. "Where is it?"

"This is where I'm going to be sadistic and make you two figure it out. It really is annoyingly simple."

"Potter," Snape growled in irritation, and Harry smirked.

"Really, you think I wouldn't make you two suffer for bursting into my mind, helpful or no? By the way, you damaged my ego, Professor," Harry continued, addressing Minerva for the last part, who had earlier shouted down his mental shields.

"Here's the clues," Harry said, inwardly cackling at the annoyance coming off the teachers in waves. Hermione had said last year that she would like nothing better than to make the professors go through everything the three of them had, and Harry had no problem fulfilling that wish. "Basilisk, it's voice coming through the walls. Hermione writing 'pipes' on the book page. Aragog saying a girl had died in a bathroom. Where is the Chamber?"

Severus glared once more at Harry before sinking into thought.

"A place with a lot of pipes... the dungeons?" He guessed, and Harry shook his head. "Damn you, Potter."

"Come now, Snape," Harry said in a mocking tone, and Snape narrowed his eyes at him. "Stop moaning about it."

"Moaning?" Minerva repeated, hearing Harry's emphasis on the word. "Moaning...a ghost? Ghoul? No..."

"Moaning Myrtle," Severus said suddenly, and his eyes flashed as he put all the clues together. "Pipes, a girl dying in the bathrooms, moaning... You mean to tell me Salazar Slytherin built his Chamber in the girls' bathroom?" He puffed up in all his Slytherin outrage, daring Harry to say that it was true.

"Right in one," Harry said with a reckless grin, and pushed opened the staff's lounge room. "And onto the meeting."

They entered the staff room to see all the teachers huddling together worriedly. "Ron and I are in the wardrobe," Harry explained at Minerva's questioning glance.

"It has happened," McGonagall said as she entered the staff room, and Minerva stifled a squeak. There was something extremely unnerving about seeing yourself five years younger. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Severus looked around in interest, noting the various expressions. Flitwick, he noted with disdain, squealed in fright, as did Trelawney and Sinistra. His other self, however, merely raised one eyebrow, not betraying any reaction besides gripping the back of a chair in a death grip.

"How can you be sure?"

Professor McGonagall answered that. "The Heir of Slytherin left another message. Right underneath the first one. 'Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.'"

Minerva gasped at the memory's recitation. "You mean something at Hogwarts actually took a student?" She hissed at Harry, who nodded as Flitwick burst into tears.

"But no one died this time," Harry reassured her, as Minerva was looking nearly as white as her counterpart.

"Who is it?" Hooch asked, interrupting their conversation. "Which student?"

"Ginny Weasley."

Severus made a small noise of acknowledgment, having realized who the student was over since Harry said her name while still suffering from amnesia. "Of course, only a Weasley could get into so much trouble."

Harry didn't even bother to roll his eyes.

"We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow," McGonagall continued. "This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said..."

All the people in the memory, Severus, and Minerva jumped as the staff room door slammed open loudly.

"So sorry -- dozed off -- what have I missed?" Lockhart tried to grin charmingly, but all the staff looked at him menacingly. Minerva herself began to look rather disillusioned.

Harry grinned as Snape stepped forward. "Oh, this is going to be good," he muttered in remembrance.

"Just the man," Snape said silkily, which never boded well for the recipient. "The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last."

Severus and Harry grinned vindictively as the teachers closed around their prey, which had turned very white.

"That's right, Gilderoy," Sprout said in a falsely cheery tone, no doubt remembering the Whomping Willow incident. "Weren't you just saying

last night that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

Her words clanged in the otherwise silent room like a mild-mannered death trap that had just decided to show its teeth.

"I -- well, I --" Lockhart stuttered, trying to find a way out.

Harry couldn't resist snickering as the teachers circled around Lockhart like vultures around prey.

"Yes," Flitwick said, his eyes glinting and his smile like that of death itself. "Didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?"

"D-did I? I don't recall--" The man was sweating bullets now, and Severus couldn't resist smirking as well as his counterpart spoke up.

"I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested. Didn't you say the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given free rein from the first?"

All the teachers were completely stone-faced, only occasional glares of hatred and annoyance breaking through.

"I -- I really never -- you may have misunderstood --"

Minerva was looking more and more put out with herself as Lockhart crumbled under the pressure.

"We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy," her counterpart said with finality. "Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. A free rein at last."

Lockhart looked around feebly for support, but saw none. He couldn't even pretend to see any.

"V-very well," the man said, trying to regain his composure after being completely taken down by his colleagues. "I'll -- I'll be in my office, getting -- getting ready."

Harry snickered as Lockhart left the room.

"Right," McGonagall continued in a tone that dismissed the interruption as nothing more than an annoyance. "That's got him out from under our feet. The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students what has happened. Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories."

There was utter silence as the teachers left, contemplating that this was the end of Hogwarts.

The three watching the memory stood in absorbing silence before they heard the wardrobe creak and two twelve-year-olds came out of it, silent and with worried expressions.

"I can definitely see the resemblance," Severus said snarkily. "Your height hasn't changed much."

Harry rolled his eyes, and, muttering threats under his breath followed the two children out of the room.

o--o--o

"BLOODY WEREWOLF!"

Almost everyone within the immediate vicinity started at the battle cry.

Unlike everyone else, however, Lily stood and stalked out of Dumbledore's office to find wherever the voice had come from. That was her husband's voice, but surely the Marauders knew better than to start something when they were trying to find a Basilisk!

She stomped down the stairs, a rant forming in her mind, when she paused, utterly aghast.

"He wouldn't..." She breathed, torn between annoyance and laughter.

Sirius and James were caught in a veritable snake pit. Green and silver snakes slithered all over them, as they themselves were trapped in shirts that praised Dark Arts and Dark Creatures (the sleeves having been pulled over their hands and tied behind their backs). Every time one of them came close to getting out, they became adorned with more Dark magic paraphernalia. James was covered in various buttons, and Sirius's head had grown a foot taller by being covered with so many baseball hats.

Remus came nonchalantly down the hallway. "You rang?"

"Get us out of here!" They both bellowed together.

"Have you learned your lesson about not being judgmental?"

"NO!" They both yelled again. "We're Gryffindors! It's in our genetic make-up!"

Remus sighed and canceled all the spells. "You two are truly pathetic. You both have known that I'm a werewolf for how long?"

"24 years," they both intoned, hands mockingly behind their backs and looking down at their shoes, as if being called to Snape's desk to recite a potion.

"That's right. So what's the problem with Collins being a Parselmouth?"

There were several disjointed mutters coming from two as Remus stood tapping his hand with his, James', and Sirius's wands impatiently.

"Well?" He asked again.

"How about we just don't like Collins because he is sarcastic and annoying, rather than because he is a Parselmouth and uses Dark Magic?" Sirius suggested, and Remus gave up.

"Fine," he said, rolling his eyes at the two of them and giving them back their wands. "You're hopeless."

"Yes," James nodded in agreement. "And you have until the count of five to run."

Remus's eyes widened as he realized that he had just given the two back their wands.

He was at the end of the corridor before James even made it to two.

o--o--o

Harry stopped the two professors before they walked any further.

"We may as well stop, since nothing is going to happen for a couple of hours," he explained, walking into a nearby classroom and sitting on one of the desks. "It was near dusk when Ron and I went to go find Lockhart."

The three sat in silence, each going over their own thoughts.

Harry hadn't fully grasped what had happened. He supposed he had been in denial for the last few days ('Had is it really only been that long?' he thought). Seeing all these people who he knew or who he should have known was very surreal, and pretending to be someone else was the only defense against an emotional breakdown.

He wasn't ready for this! Harry had always wished for a family, one who would rescue him from the Dursleys and actually care about him. With a roll of his eyes, Harry thought that he would probably be the only teenager in history to smile the first time he got grounded, because that was such a family-type thing.

But now?

Now Harry valued his independence, his separation from anyone who had the authority to forbid him from fighting. What would happen the

first time Lily told him he couldn't fight, that he was too young? Harry mentally winced at the scenario.

James, Sirius, Remus, and Pettigrew... He would never feel comfortable with the idea of them as a group, not after Wormtail's betrayal. And certainly not after they, the ones here, had watched him with such animosity, their hands clutching their wands whenever he was in the room.

Voldemort was always something to consider as well, as he had many times before. The Potters, already targets, would move up to the top of the list.

"Why?"

Harry started as the voice broke into his thoughts. Blinking to readjust his eyes, Harry turned to look at Minerva.

"Blackboards are black so the white chalk will show up," Harry said blandly, then shifted nervously at the harsh look. "Why what?"

"Why everything!" Minerva asked. "Why did you lie about who you were, why did you feel like you had to, why are you so Dark and involved in the war in your world, why do you dislike Mr. Pettigrew and Black, why--"

Harry drew his knees up to his chest. He hadn't felt this insecure in a long time. "There are too many different answers to that," he said softly. "Too many things have happened for me to just tell everyone anything. I..." he paused here, completely lost in what to say, what not to say. "...I'm so used-- this is just -- this is the way it is supposed to be." Harry decided on finally. His heart felt heavy as he said it out loud.

This is the way it is supposed to be. Who says the Potters would even accept him into the family in the first place? It was so obvious that they wouldn't and why would they? Harry was Harry, attractor of trouble, dark wizard, murderer, irritating to no end. 'Who knew,' Harry thought glumly, 'that the Dursleys could be so accurate. Now that I have a family, they won't want me in the first place.'

"That certainly does not qualify as an answer, Potter," Snape snapped. "Though it was certainly self-pitying enough to be from a true Gryffindor."

Harry's head snapped up at that, glaring at the Potions Master.

"My guess," Snape continued viciously, "is that you and the rest of the Potter ilk got into an argument in your universe, and you petulantly decided to not reveal who you are."

Fire blazed from Harry's eyes. "You could take Trelawney's spot, Professor," Harry said scathingly, "as owner of the worst reasoning in history."

Minerva looked curiously at Severus, and not just a bit angrily. She had heard of his meticulous destruction of an adversary's self-control over anger, and assumed he was just showing off his prowess. However, the fact that they had both seen the memory claiming the Potters and Sirius Black dead, hinted at another reason. Rather than foil whatever plan she knew her Slytherin friend was up to, Minerva decided to remain quiet.

"How did that ridiculous mutt die in your world?" Snape asked next, purposely keeping Harry from finding solid ground.

Harry gasped at the sudden reminder of his godfather's death, mentioned in such a casual manner. Memories swept through his mind of that fateful night... being taunted by Bellatrix Lestrange, Hermione being hit by that powerful curse, Neville being put under the Cruciatus, Sirius falling into the Veil, putting the Cruciatus on Bellatrix.

Minerva, meanwhile, raised her eyebrows in surprise. Severus's method at magic-less interrogation was more brutal than she had thought, and, as she watched the emotionless mask fall off of Collin's... no, Harry's face and showing true hurt emotion, more effective.

"How--" Harry asked weakly. He knew that he hadn't dropped any clues about his past. He hadn't said anything about Sirius, not enough to make anyone guess that he had actually died...

"Is that why you dislike Pettigrew? Did he kill Black?" Snape questioned without pause, and Harry covered his face with his hands because he certainly didn't trust himself to keep his emotions under control. "No, it was Lestrage, I remember. You also put the Cruciatus Curse on her, so she must've. How did he die, though? Avada Kedavra? Extensive torturing? Telling Black that common sense does exist? Well, that explains how your father died, at least..."

"Stop!" Harry yelled, his voice cracking as he listened to Snape go on and on. "No! Just -- Shut up! Stop!"

"Good." Snape sat smartly back down, as if he hadn't just verbally attacked Harry. "You willing to answer questions now?"

Harry took a deep breath. Merlin, he had forgotten how much he hated Snape. The man was a menace, and judging by the Potion Master's expression, knew that exactly, and was quite happy about the title.

"What did you have in mind?" Harry ground out as he worked furiously to bring his emotions under control. Snape settled down into his usual interrogation pose, and Harry noticed with amusement that McGonagall's was nearly identical.

"What is your full name?" Snape asked with the tone of getting everything declared for certain.

"Harry James Potter." Minerva couldn't help but hide a wince. The seventeen-year-old in front of her was not what she imagined anyone wanting for a son.

"How did your parents die?"

Harry shivered before pushing his emotions, every single one of them, into a dark corner he rarely accessed. Then he frowned. Unless he was mistaken, that corner felt a little less empty than usual. He

shrugged it off. It probably felt that way because he was already behind his Occlumency shields.

"By the Killing Curse on Halloween, 1981. Voldemort."

Minerva started at that. "That was the same day you--I mean, Harry--" She took a deep breath before trying again. "That was the same day James' and Lily's son died."

"Why didn't you die?" Snape asked. "The Dark Lord would hardly leave a survivor behind."

Harry paused. Tell them or don't?

"Voldemort didn't know I was there," Harry lied, and Snape sneered.

"As if the Dark Lord wouldn't know if so much as a particularly lively dust mite were floating around. Try again, Potter."

"He was killed right after he killed my mother," Harry lied again, but knew this time he would be believed. The one lie was necessary to convince Snape that Harry was telling the truth this time. "Voldemort was going to let her go, because she had only come to kill my dad and I, because we were Potters by blood. She refused to leave me behind, so Voldemort killed her." Harry was mentally cursing himself, because lying about his parents' deaths seemed so fundamentally wrong. It was sacrilegious to the extreme, but Harry continued, keeping the same monotone, emotionless voice. "But magic was outraged that he killed someone so selfless, so it tried to take Voldemort's life as well, to equal the balance."

There was a couple seconds of silence as the two professors drank that knowledge in. "And you survived."

"No, I died," Harry sniped. "Yes, I survived."

"Well, that explains so much," Snape sneered in annoyance. "You act like such an idiot because you were doubtlessly raised by Black. Wonderful."

Harry averted his eyes. What he would have given to be raised by Sirius, rather than going to the Dursleys and rather than Sirius going to Azkaban...

"You did live with Black, didn't you?" Minerva asked, picking up on his reluctance to speak.

"Erm..." Harry knew his parents would eventually ask, seeing as how it was guaranteed the two professors wouldn't keep anything to themselves. "No, I did not."

"Why not?"

He wasn't quite sure how to answer that. Sure, Dumbledore had spoke of blood wards and all that, but Harry had never really believed that. So saying he didn't know would be the truth, rather than getting into Sirius and Azkaban.

"You know, that's a really good question," he answered. "But what does it matter?"

"Well, there has to be some reason why you're, well..." Minerva stopped as she realized she had put her foot in her mouth.

"Not like a Potter?" Harry supplied. "Evil?"

Harry sighed and shook his head. This was not going over well, not at all.

Minerva opened her mouth to ask something else, but Harry jumped off the desk before she could. "Time to go," he said, motioning to the slowly reddening sun, but watching the tiny line of spiders moving quickly for a crack in the wall.

He left the classroom without another word, not particularly caring if either of them followed him out.

o--o--o

Dumbledore followed Poppy Pomfrey down the path to the Hospital Wing. It appeared that Chris Collins was on the mend, if he was talking, presumably to Minerva and Severus.

Albus didn't deny that he hoped that one of the two professors would find out more of the mysterious Collins, who seemed to have experience for any situation and kept everything else close to the vest.

He, in all his years of teaching, had never met such an enigmatic teenager.

Albus also hoped that Collins might say something out loud to help them find out where this Chamber of Secrets was, along with any other knowledge that would alter be helpful.

Not to mention, the esteemed Headmaster wasn't above using blackmail with whatever Chris Collins said.

Almost as if hearing that last thought, Fawkes appeared right before the door that led to the Hospital. Despite jumping in surprise, Poppy continued to reach for the door handle, and barely got her hand out of the way before Fawkes tried to bite it.

"Fawkes!" Albus said in surprise. "What in Merlin's name are you doing?"

The phoenix trilled and flew back and forth before the door, obviously guarding it from entry.

"Come now Fawkes, it is not as if we're on a mission to injure anyone."

Fawkes twittered in annoyance, but refused to budge.

They were interrupted from finding a solution, however, as Remus Lupin ran up the corridor towards them.

"We found it!"

o--o--o

Harry stalked down the hallway angrily, walking fast purposely to make the two professors struggle to keep up.

"Co-Potter!" Minerva said behind him, a little out of breath. "Slow down, would you!"

He immediately skidded to a halt and tapped his foot condescendingly as they caught up.

"Going too fast for you?" He asked, and got two glares in response.

"Excuse us for going normal human speeds, Potter, and not throwing a fit," Snape replied, and Harry curled his lip in response.

"Perhaps you didn't notice that the Basilisk was near that classroom," he said, and smirked as Minerva's eyes widened.

"You took us to a classroom where the Basilisk was?" She exclaimed in shock.

"No, I didn't even realize the Basilisk was still roaming the halls. I thought it was locked up tight in the Chamber." Harry saw the question on both of their faces. "The line of spiders," he answered. "They run away from any Basilisks, so I knew one was coming."

"How do you know it's not still coming this way? And isn't it just a memory?"

Harry wordlessly pointed at the memory of Ron and himself knocking on Lockhart's door. "It obviously didn't attack us here, so no, I don't think it would come after us."

He honestly wasn't sure if he could make the words seem any more condescending. He decided to try anyway. "And the eyes of a Basilisk can kill. I'm not sure if that applies in a memory or not."

Minerva was about to respond but Harry cut her off with a look. "Wait. Here's Lockhart's defining moment of idiocy."

The three stood and watched as the door slowly opened, Harry pushing away all his worries about them finding out his identity.

Nothing could help a mood like watching an idiot single-handedly destroy his reputation.

Chapter 11: Completely Unexpected

Minerva watched as the door opened slowly, and only admitted the tiniest bit of light from inside. She was earnestly hoping that Lockhart wasn't as big of a fool as Co—Potter insisted, if just to save her own pride.

Without really wanting to, her eyes slid over to the teenager in question. By his physical appearance, she was surprised that no one had realized who he really was. Sure, he more than likely had some sort of charm on himself, but someone should have recognized him before he got a wand.

His black hair, though longer than James, was no doubt as uncooperative when it was shorter. His facial structure was incredibly like James's as well, though scars (and glares, on occasion) stopped people from analyzing his appearance. His eyes weren't remotely like Lily's, though, because they were dark and shut off, rather than bright and full of emotion.

That issue aside... she shivered. James Potter, for all his judgments and occasional maliciousness in pranks, was nearly as far from being evil or Dark as Dumbledore himself. Lily also, while possessing a frightful temper, was completely Light. Holly and Rose, of course, were mixtures of their parents. There was no way, no way that the Potter in front of her could possibly fit in.

A tiny nagging voice in the back of her mind asked what had happened to make Harry the way he was, but Minerva dismissed it. There was no excuse for Dark magic, not even in Severus's case.

She sighed, wondering how she could tell James and Lily about this. It was bad enough that their son died, but that a Harry Potter from another universe could be so far from their hopes? She shoved the thought away, deciding to concentrate on the issue at hand.

Besides, she couldn't help but think that at the age of twelve, surely Potter wasn't that bad. She watched him and the slightly taller Ron Weasley shuffle nervously outside the door as it opened.

“Oh – Mr. Potter – Mr. Weasley –” Lockhart said, unable to conjure as brilliant a smile as usual. Minerva ignored the smirk directed at her from Severus, also trying to ignore the impulse to step on his foot once more. “I’m rather busy at the moment – if you would be quick –”

The twelve-year-old Harry looked nervously at Ron before turning back to Lockhart. “Professor, we’ve got some information for you. We think it will help you.”

A quick look of confusion passed over Lockhart's face at the allusion to Lockhart's job of finding the monster, but it soon went away, replaced by a look of extreme discomfort.

“Er – well – it's not terribly –” Lockhart stopped as Harry's younger self put on a slightly in awe face, as if amazed to talk to the celebrity. “I mean – well – all right –”

The older Harry snickered. “What an idiot. I'd been running away from him in horror every time I saw him, and he still fell for that.”

“Running away in horror?” Severus asked curiously.

Harry sighed. “It's a long story, but he was trying to give me advice as how to take advantage of my fame.”

He turned to see their questioning expressions at the word 'fame'. “Don't ask. You really don't want to know.”

The three followed the two second-years into Lockhart's office, which was completely dismantled. Snape looked around in disgust at the life-size pictures of Lockhart adorning the walls, all in various states of primping, and piles of hideously colored robes stuffed in trunks. The look deepened as he saw steadily falling stacks of fan mail being hastily put in order on the desk.

“Are you going somewhere?” The younger Harry asked in a slightly cold tone, also eying the room with dislike. Despite the seriousness of the occasion, he discretely kicked one of the robes into the sooty

fireplace, and Ron toppled a stack of mail into a wastebasket that magically Vanished the contents.

“Obnoxious little heathens, weren't you?” Minerva asked, though with a small bit of amusement.

Harry grinned wickedly. “Most definitely.”

“Er, well, yes,” Lockhart answered, rolling up a poster of himself and stuffing it into a like-wise stuffed trunk. “Urgent call – unavoidable – got to go –”

The two students shared a look of deep skepticism, though the redhead was slightly angry as well.

“What about my sister?” He ground out, now glaring at the loosely-titled 'Professor'.

“Well, as to that – most unfortunate –” Lockhart tried to avoid their eyes. “No one regrets more than I –” But Harry was having none of it.

“You're the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!” He said, and the older Harry winced at how young and naïve he sounded. “You can't go now! Not with all the Dark stuff going on here!”

“Well – I must say – when I took the job – nothing in the job description – didn't expect –” Lockhart fumbled around for his socks, which the second years were looking at as if they'd like nothing more than to catch them on fire.

“You're mean you're running away?” Harry asked in a scandalized tone, which Ron also copied by facial expression. “After all that stuff you did in your books--”

Lockhart tried to put on a sly expression, but it failed and he went with bland. “Books can be misleading.”

“Ha!” The older Harry said out loud in victory, and Minerva blushed.

“Fine, fine, I'll go and transfigure his books into suitable items later. Can we watch the memory now?”

Harry rolled his eyes and allowed the focus to go back to the memory, though a gleam in both his and Snape's eyes promised bringing this up at a later date.

“You wrote them!” The younger Harry yelled indignantly.

Lockhart now decided to adopt a chastising expression. One that had grated on Harry's nerves then and grated on them now.

“My dear boy, do use your common sense. My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think I'd done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He'd look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a harelip. I mean, come on —”

“So you've just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?” Harry asked, and rolled his eyes when Lockhart began to deny it. Ron, on the other hand, had a decidedly smug expression on.

“Harry, Harry.” Lockhart shook his head as if pitying Harry's lack of intelligence. “It's not nearly as simple as that. There was work involved. I had to track those people down. Ask them exactly how they managed to do what they did. Then I had to put a Memory Charm on them so they wouldn't remember doing it. If there's one thing I pride myself on--”

Ron, both Harrys, and Snape all muttered, “One thing?”

“--it's my Memory Charms. No, it's been a lot of work, Harry. It's not all book signings and publicity photos, you know. You want fame, you have to be prepared for a long hard slog.”

As if punctuating his rather pathetic speech, Lockhart snapped shut his trunks and turned to face the two.

“Let's see, I think that's about everything. Yes. Only one thing left.”

Minerva's eyes widened as Lockhart aimed his wand at Harry and Ron, while Severus's narrowed.

“Awfully sorry, boys, but I'll have to put a Memory Charm on you now. Can't have you blabbing my secrets all over the place. I'd never sell another book –”

The younger Harry quickly pulled his wand out of his pocket and aimed it directly at Lockhart. “Expelliarmus!”

Lockhart flew the air from the force of Harry's anger-driven spell, dropping his wand in the process. Ron, grinning savagely, grabbed the wand and threw it out a nearby window, where Harry saw, now that he was tall enough, to see that it nearly hit Albus Dumbledore, who was walking up the steps to the castle.

“Shouldn't have let Professor Snape teach us that one,” Harry snarled as he kicked a trunk out of the way. The older Harry now realized why others had thought him capable of opening the Chamber. He really was kind of frightening when furious.

“What do you want me to do?” Lockhart sniveled, making Minerva mutter a few choice words about being held at wand-point by a preteen. “I don't know where the Chamber of Secrets is. There's nothing I can do.”

“You're in luck,” Harry answered, motioning for Lockhart to get up. “We think we know where it is. And what's inside it.” Harry looked at Ron, who had been using a recording spell that Hermione taught them in December to record Malfoy's confession. It was one of the few spells that didn't cause mayhem due to Ron's broken wand. The redhead grinned in triumph and nodded at Harry's questioning glance. Lockhart's confession had been recorded. “Let's go.”

“What was the point of bringing Lockhart with you?” Minerva asked looking thoroughly disgusted with Lockhart. “Surely he wasn't helpful.”

“No, but Ron and I could hardly leave him there. We wouldn't let him escape and flee the country or find another wand and Obliviate us.” Harry answered, as they trailed the three heading towards Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. “Not to mention, if there was a Basilisk, Ron and I hardly wanted to be killed first.”

Minerva gaped at the viciousness in his voice. “Twelve years old, and you were planning to let Lockhart be bait.”

“Nonsense!” Harry answered. “He was big enough to block Ron and me from view of a Basilisk. Why lose that advantage by offering him up for bait?”

Snape stifled a chuckle at Minerva's expression.

“See? Look,” Harry pointed as Ron and his younger self pushed Lockhart into the bathroom first, smirking as the man trembled as he walked in.

Moaning Myrtle glared sorrowfully as the six walked in.

“Oh, it's you,” she huffed at Harry in annoyance. “What do you want this time?”

The older Harry chuckled at the memory of the cross Myrtle occasionally crossing his path during sixth year, always grumbling about never being visited.

“To ask how you died,” Harry answered.

“Oh, wonderful,” Snape complained. “Now the dreadful ghost is going to start wailing.”

Instead of the predicted wailing, Myrtle looked rapturously at Harry and fluttered her eyelashes, looking absolutely flattered

“Ooh, it was dreadful,” she began the tale, and Ron and Harry rolled their eyes, as well as the three watching the memory. “It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Oliver Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying,” (“Hufflepuff,” Snape muttered dismissively) “and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then –” Myrtle paused with obvious relish, her eyes shining.

“I died.”

O--O

“Found what, exactly?” Dumbledore asked, rather put out that Fawkes refused him entrance to the Hospital Wing. “The Chamber?”

“So we think. When Moaning Myrtle walked into your office, she seemed like she knew what was going on, but didn't really want to tell us. She appeared again when Lily and Peter were trying to find any unexplained passages in those old maps. Something about Oliver Hornby and a different language.”

“Hmm,” Dumbledore answered, but walked next to Remus towards the second floor.

“Lily said that the only situation that made sense would be for the Chamber to somehow be connected to Myrtle's bathroom. Since the ghost didn't get to tell everyone that herself, she flew off in a huff. We're rounding everyone up to meet there now.”

They walked towards Myrtle's bathroom in silence, Albus thinking about the ramifications of the Chamber of Secrets actually existing in the school. It was amazing to think that a Basilisk and a Justerion could have been roaming the hallways of his school for all these years... It really was a miracle no students had been injured or killed.

He pulled out his wand as the two met the group huddled around the doorway. There was an odd rustling sound inside, and Albus told everyone to get their wands out. "Be prepared to cover your eyes, in case the Basilisk is up and restless."

As soon as everyone complied, Albus moved to the front of the group and pushed the door open with his foot. Everyone was holding their breath in anticipation and nervousness, until --

"BOO!"

With exclamations of surprise, the group jumped at hearing the voice of Hogwarts's residential annoyance. Peeves.

"Ha Ha! Thought little Peevesy was a snake, did they? Hee hee hee!" The poltergeist flew out of the bathroom, performing back flips in the air and blowing raspberries at the annoyed witches and wizards. "Course, invading Miss Myrtle's toilet is not the politest thing to do!"

Myrtle floated out the doorway, giggling at the still startled and angry looks, but squeaked in horror as the Marauders and the Prewitt brothers grinned evilly at her.

"Now, now," Peeves interrupted, standing in front of Myrtle in an exaggerated hero pose, arms akimbo and face tilted at a supposedly dashing angle. "No threatening Miss Myrty!"

Myrtle giggled again, until Peeves spun around, tweaked Myrtle's nose, ignoring the resulting high-pitched "Ow!", and flew off through a wall.

Albus sighed, not realizing how close they truly were to their target and that Myrtle had, in fact, been telling the truth earlier. "Back to square one, I suppose."

The group dispersed, back to their researching or manual searching, lowering scathing glares at the ghost or cracking their knuckles threateningly.

O--O

“Who first?”

Harry looked at his two companions. The three of the memory had already slid into the Chamber of Secrets (or, in Lockhart's case, been pushed with much glee), but no one was willing to follow them.

“I refuse to go first,” Minerva said firmly. “You Slytherins with grimy, slimy snake holes. One of you two will be going first.”

“I'm a Gryffindor, I'll have you know,” Harry said indignantly, and that odd expression fixed itself on Minerva's face for an instant, before leaving, making Harry almost wonder if he had just imagined it. “Make Snape go first.”

They both turned to stare down Snape, who raised an eyebrow sardonically. “Not a chance.”

“Oh, for Merlin's sake,” Harry exclaimed. “We're missing the best part!”

With that, he pushed Minerva down the entrance way, who started falling with a shriek, then jumped down himself, knowing that Snape's curiosity would make him follow.

The tunnel was as dank as he remembered, covered with dirt and slime that had never seen the light of day. He smirked, though, seeing the deep chunk of sludge that had most likely latched onto Minerva.

Chuckling as he slid down the grimy slide, he did not expect an ambush just after landing. But as soon as he came out of the slide, Minerva's boot entered his field of vision, aiming directly for his arm.

“Bloody Hell!” Harry yelled as the force of the kick made him fly off sideways and bang into the wall.

He rubbed his arm as he gingerly stood up, just as Severus came down the slide, looked as aloof as always, and, Harry thought snidely, only a trifle more greasy than usual. Then he turned back to McGonagall.

“What was that for, you mad woman!”

“What was that for? WHAT WAS THAT FOR!” Minerva yelled in anger. “Harry James Potter, you pushed me down here. That's what that was for!”

“It's not like you came to bodily harm or anything,” Harry grouched as Minerva muttered in anger and Severus began to chuckle. “Stop laughing Snape.”

Still grumbling about the unexpected attack, Harry led the way down the passage to where the voices were coming from.

“Lumos,” he muttered, despite knowing that his other self had already lit his wand. Harry wanted to see exactly how the cave-in started. “Demosta.”

Minerva sighed with relief as the grime, which had become very interactive, disappeared from the three of their cloaks, and then narrowed her eyes at Harry.

“I've never heard that spe-- Never mind,” she said firmly. “I don't want to know.”

Harry let out a bark of laughter. “Light magic, Professor, I swear.”

She sniffed indignantly, and Harry let it go. It was probably more of a slightly shadowy spell than actually Light or Dark.

“Remember,” echoed Harry's twelve-year-old voice, “any sign of movement, close your eyes right away...”

“Co-Potter,” Minerva asked shakily, “you didn't meet anything unexpectedly, did you?”

“Yes,” Harry answered. “Just up the turn. But don't worry, we made it out alive.”

“Harry! There's something up there,” Ron suddenly exclaimed hoarsely, making Minerva gasp.

But nothing happened.

“Maybe it's asleep,” the other Harry suggested, and then stepped forward to look at it. His wand revealed the green tail of a huge Basilisk.

Minerva yelled at the memory's Harry to get away, and then fell silent as the light shone more fully on it, revealing it to be nothing more than a snake-skin.

Harry kept his face emotionless as Minerva turned toward him angrily. “Funny, Potter,” she ground out, and Harry calmly raised one eyebrow.

“I thought so,” he responded, then watched as Lockhart fell to the ground.

“Get up,” Ron snapped, pointing his wand at him, only to have Lockhart tackle him and steal the broken wand.

The memory Harry jumped forward, his eyes widening as Lockhart prepared to use the faulty wand. Then the twelve-year-old stopped, with a slightly malicious gleam in his eye.

“The adventure ends here, boys!” Lockhart exclaimed. “I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two tragically lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body -- say good-bye to your memories!”

“Good grief,” Harry muttered as he watched the memory. “I forgot how much Lockhart favored monologuing. He did it enough in class.”

“Obliviate!” Lockhart yelled, and promptly flew backwards as the wand exploded.

Harry watched this part with narrowed eyes and followed the path of the wand core as it floated through the air, then daintily touched a stone of a rough engraving of a snake.

And the tunnel imploded.

The three watched, uninjured by the flying rocks, as Ron and Harry dove for cover, though separated by a solid wall of rocks.

Harry not having seen this part chuckled as Lockhart looked around with a completely befuddled expression that would have matched those of Crabbe and Goyle.

Harry's muffled shout came through the rock wall, and Ron yelled back. “I'm here! I'm okay! This git's not, though, he got blasted by the wand.”

Ron glared at the now mumbling form of Lockhart and kicked him in the shin.

The celebrity responded with an undignified, “Ow!”

Harry motioned to the two professors. “Come on. We need to get to the other side.”

He looked at the wall critically, and then put his hand against it, nodding as it pushed through. 'This is simple,' he thought as he walked through the wall and once more saw his twelve-year-old self, who was beginning to panic a bit. However, the memory Harry shook out of it at the sound of another whining, “Ow!” from Lockhart.

“You're wasting time,” Harry muttered worriedly as Minerva and Snape walked through the wall. His memory self was spending an awful long time staring at the rocks. As Harry's voice echoed slightly, the memory Harry snapped out of it and began to move again.

Harry froze as he realized what he had said. He remembered that voice entering his thoughts five years ago. You're wasting time. Surely he wasn't influencing this. He wasn't under the effects of a time-turner.

But they weren't in a Pensieve, either. How...

Harry turned on his aptly titled 'Hermione voice', the one he used whenever studying or thinking through something. He had heard Hermione mutter her way through situations before, and had stolen her method.

He didn't know how they had gotten into this memory. He had just thought about how to get to it.

The Justern poison was a completely unknown substance. It just somehow trapped him in his mind and caused temporary amnesia.

He paced back and forth ignoring the strange looks from Minerva and Severus. Maybe it wasn't a memory at all. Maybe they had actually entered his mind DURING the event!

Harry concentrated on reading the thoughts of his other self, which was embarrassingly easy since he had had no Occlumency training before this. Right now the twelve-year-old was plotting on how to get Ron through the wall.

"You don't have time for that!" Harry snapped at his younger self, continuing to ignore the odd looks he was getting. "That would take hours. Leave Ron and get Ginny by yourself!"

"Wait there," the twelve-year-old obediently yelled through the rock. "Wait with Lockhart. I'll go on... If I'm not back in an hour..."

Harry's eyes widened during the pause, as Severus's eyes narrowed trying to figure out what was going on. It had worked!

“I'll try to shift some of this rock,” Ron said back, his voice barely steady. “So you can...get back through.” There was a pause as if Ron was about to say else.

Harry didn't remember Ron actually saying anything, so told himself to go, just as Ron said, “and, Harry...”

“See you in a bit,” the black-haired twelve-year-old said firmly, though shakily.

And he walked towards the black tunnel, continuing alone.

“Potter,” Snape said in the silence, “what was that?”

“I don't think we're in a memory,” he responded. “Or the dirt would never have stuck to us, and our feet wouldn't be crunching right now.

“I think we're actually here, in the Chamber, in my mind five years ago.”

o--o

Lily paused in her search through old records of school events.

They were searching through everything possible to find the location of the Chamber and the Basilisk. Just in case Severus and Minerva couldn't reach Collins, or the memory.

Or if Collins didn't make it out of whatever coma the poison had put him in.

She shivered as she thought about that. She didn't really know him, and she knew that her husband, Sirius, Remus, and Peter would kick him out of the castle sooner than talk to him. But she couldn't help but link that strange feeling she had every once in a while to him. Maybe her magic just sensed he wasn't from this world, or that the Dark Magic surrounding Collins was warning her away, but she didn't think that that was all of it.

She slammed the journal shut, and then smiled sheepishly in apology as heads turned to glare at her.

Lily shook her head, knowing she was being ridiculous. That odd feeling plaguing her was just warning her that something was off, and that she should keep her children away from Collins. Molly Weasley had often tried to explain a sort of sixth sense to her, one that warned her when one of her sons had picked the lock to the broom cupboard, and had followed her for a year when the Malfoy boy, Draco, had tried several times to send her twins to Voldemort.

The twins, of course, had created an array of pranks that mocked Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

Maybe that was it, she convinced herself. A sixth sense was bothering her, because Collins was proficient in Dark Magic. And he regularly scoffed at the mention of You-Know-Who, which would surely put anyone in proximity with him in danger.

Remus was right, she thought as she rifled through a box of parchment. Keep Holly and Rose away.

o--o

The three followed the younger Harry as he walked alone towards a wall covered in engraved and painted snakes, all with glimmering jeweled eyes and wickedly sharp fangs.

Two snakes in particular stood out, being deeply etched in the stone. The younger Harry stepped forward, looking at the snakes with suspicion and a little awe.

“Open,” he hissed, and both Minerva and Severus winced at the harsh, whispery sound.

All four stepped through the doorway, the sound of breath unnervingly loud in the stone Chamber.

“Lumos,” Severus muttered, and the room developed shadows that twisted out of the five foot radius of light. “Impressive.”

Harry looked around himself as his younger self ran towards Ginny. “It really is, isn't it?” Harry said back, only now being able to appreciate the Chamber.

The walls were covered with life-like engravings of snakes, though they all had stones of deep onyx for eyes rather than emeralds. The ceiling was far from sight, but Harry could tell from the endless echoing that it was at a very lofty height.

Only Minerva seemed unimpressed, as she wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the cold and figurative chill. “What I wouldn't give for a fireplace and a couple of rugs.”

Harry laughed, imagining the room redecorated with deep red and gold carpets, squashy armchairs, and dozens of Gryffindor scarfs forgotten and drooping all over the place. “How horrifying, defacing Slytherin's Chamber right in front of his life-size stone statue.”

The two professors whirled around, starting as they saw the giant face of Salazar Slytherin. “What do you mean, 'life-size'...?” Snape stopped and glared menacingly as he realized what Harry was saying. Minerva covered her mouth in a vain effort to stifle her laughter at the sight of the enormous head of Slytherin, which, with all the pureblood mania Slytherin had spouted, was probably the actual size of his head.

“Funny, Potter,” Snape snapped in return. “Too bad that Justern didn't fatally poison you.”

Harry grunted in return, hands clenching as if trying to throttle the dead creature. He hadn't realized until too late how deadly the creature was, and Harry knew he was lucky to escape the encounter with his life. In fact, Harry was certain a particular prophecy was behind that stroke of luck...

“You said we were actually here, right?” Minerva asked as Fawkes appeared, the Sorting Hat in claw.

“I think so,” Harry answered. “I remember feeling someone yell at me in front of the caved-in passage, and there's no way that could happen in just a memory.

“So the Basilisk is real, too?”

“Erm, maybe?”

“I suggest,” Severus commented, watching as Slytherin's mouth opened and a huge creature began to stir from inside, “that since we now know where the Chamber of Secrets is, and how to get there, that we no longer need to be here?”

The three stared transfixed as Riddle yelled in Parseltongue and the snake swung its head their direction.

“Seconded,” Harry exclaimed, and yanked them out of the memory.

They appeared back in the stone cave, right next to the destroyed door Harry had come through earlier.

There was silence for a minute as they all realized how close to discovering how it felt to lock eyes with a Basilisk.

“Well,” Harry began in a light-hearted voice, “that's something to research: would the Basilisk have actually killed us?”

“Why don't you volunteer and find out?” Minerva snapped, and Harry raised one eyebrow.

“No need to be so testy about a brush with death. It's not like it's that unusual or anything,” Harry said. “Now, if you try dying by proving Hogwarts, A History wrong... that's a fun and unusual way to die.”

Harry didn't even bother to explain that one, but grinned in remembrance of pretending to Apparate out of the Great Hall, then frowned at the remembrance of having to do his History of Magic Homework by himself.

Maybe not such a fun way to die.

“How do we get out of here?” Minerva asked, deciding to ignore any comments from Harry. “We found the memory of the Chamber, and found him,” she pointed in Harry's direction, “and his identity. Now what?”

The two professors fell into a muttered conversation, which seemed to be specifically designed to exclude Harry. Feeling nervous now that his time as Chris Collins was most certainly up, Harry sat down with his eyes closed and tried to make contact with his Occlumency shields. They would no doubt be instrumental to getting out of here.

He cracked an eye open in curiosity before settling down. Why exactly did his mind consist of stony passageways?

Concentrate, he thought to himself and focused once more on his mental shields. They seemed the same as always, a smoky gray that twisted and turned as if created by an unseen fire. The inside of an Occlumency Shield was personalized to each, but Harry still had no idea as to why his shield was representative of smoke. He hadn't asked anyone, either, because it was such a personal thing. One book had likened telling someone what the inside of your shield looked like to revealing every single one of your secrets, and every single one of your thoughts. Harry doubted he would ever be able to do that.

Shaking his head free of distracting thoughts, Harry critically examined the wall. There wasn't anything obviously wrong with it, but Harry placed a mental hand on it just to be sure. If they were unaffected, then it would feel like touching a wall, then sliding your hand through water.

Gasping in pain, Harry's eyes flew open and he yanked his physical hand back protectively. The shield felt as if it was trying to trying to

burn his hand off, as waves as magical energy reverberated to the spot he had touched.

His hand shaking, Harry turned it around to see if the burn left any physical mark, not surprised to see the fingertips turning an ugly reddish purple. He narrowed his eyes at the deeper colors, which were configured into ruins on his fingertips.

“Monumentum... omitto... sum fui futurus... invenio,” Harry muttered. “What the bloody Hell does that mean? ‘Memories lost—to be found?’” Then his eyes widened in realization. He prodded the back corner of his mind. Visions of Voldemort, memories of attacks, death, battles... He had known earlier it was lighter, but hadn't realized... “Nooo.”

o--o

Severus walked over to Minerva. “Now what?”

“Dear Merlin, I don't know,” Minerva answered, combing her fingers through her hair in frustration. “Do you mean ‘how do we get out of here’ or ‘how do we deal with him being a Potter?’”

“Both or either.” Severus dropped his guard, having been friends with Minerva for too long to bother. “How is Lily going to react to this?”

They both remembered the night the Harry of this world had been killed. Almost everyone had been at an Order meeting at Hogwarts. Lily had decide to leave Harry under the care of Toni Armadis, Sirius's (as was later discovered) soon-to-be fiancé. Toni had turned down the invitation to join the Order, saying that it would cross too many lines of her Ministry job. Molly had also left her youngest son Ron under her care, wisely deciding that while Bill and Charlie could take care of the twins, an additional almost two-year-old would be too much.

The Halloween meeting had almost drawn to a close when the Floo in Dumbledore's office shot into action, and, as green flames sprang

into fiery activity, Ron Weasley appeared, crying Toni's name hysterically and covered in soot.

Everyone had rushed into action, though James and Lily beat everyone to the fireplace. They instantly departed for Toni's apartment, but it was too late.

The Aurors figured it all out a couple days later. Voldemort had easily overcome the wards over Toni's home, leaving the magical shreds behind in flagrant disregard. He had burst through the front door and, ignoring Toni and Ron at first, moved straight for Harry.

Voldemort had apparently not considered the Killing Curse as enough insurance of the child's death, so had quickly incanted a complicated ritual that completely eradicated the boy's soul. Harry Potter couldn't even be a ghost, let alone have his soul go towards the others that had passed on. If a portrait had been made of the small child, the Auror coldly explained, even that would no longer be animated.

Harry Potter hadn't just died, he ceased to exist.

Lily not being able to stand the undercurrent of the Auror's tone, which quite plainly said that as a half-blood the boy wasn't worth anything, and had executed an amazing uppercut and shrieked a primal cry of rage that became sort of a tall tale among the Auror Academy. All new recruits were told the dangers of antagonizing anyone with red hair or mothers of young children.

Once a replacement Auror had been found, since the other needed immediate hospital care (and a security guard), the story continued. Toni, knowing that she would have no chance to beat the feared wizard but having no desire to just cut and run, leaving Harry to his fate, dove towards the fireplace to push Ron through, before standing and glaring straight at Voldemort.

She had died quickly, the Aurors told a Sirius with dark eyes and a pulsing jaw, and from her bruised knuckles, it was obvious that she had tutored Lily in the fine art of punching.

Regardless of the proud gleam that had come to his eyes at the thought of his girlfriend slugging Voldemort, he had never been the same.

And neither had Lily.

They had both thrown themselves into their pursuits, Lily: her family and the Order, and Sirius: the Marauders, his godchildren, and the Order.

“She won't take it well,” Minerva answered. “It'll just wake up all the old memories. I don't think she'd be able to stand it. Suddenly having her child reappears, seventeen years old and a Dark Wizard?” She shivered. “The Fates must be in a cruel mood.”

“We have to tell Albus at the very least,” Severus warned, and Minerva nodded. “Who knows what this means for the fight against the Dark Lord. Remember that old prophecy that pertained to both Potter and Longbottom?”

Minerva's eyes widened. She had completely forgotten about that. Only Albus, Severus, and herself knew about it, none of them seeing any reason to tell the Potters and the Longbottoms that their dead (or insane) children were the only hope against Voldemort.

“Personally,” Severus spoke up again, “I'm a bit concerned about Co—Potter himself.”

“Why?” Minerva asked. “I know that he was suddenly dropped into a world where his parents and Black are alive, but what other concerns?”

Severus sneered at her narrow grasp on the situation, only to be glared at. “What happens when everyone discovers who he is, only to reject him? I have no doubt he is already somewhat unbalanced, Minerva. How could he not be? But it could throw him over the edge of sanity.”

The witch turned to look at Harry, whose eyes were glazed over in the manner of those looking at their Occlumency shields. She had no doubt Severus was right, as he had much more study into psychology than she herself did. And how much could one seventeen-year-old take?

They both started as Harry gasped, his eyes reverting to their normal state and his outstretched right hand purpling and reddening as if burned.

The person of their discussion muttered to himself a bit before his eyes widened. "Nooo," he moaned as if he had lost part of himself.

"What is it, Potter?" Snape snapped, unnerved by the sound of loss.

Harry shook himself out of it, and glared at Snape. "Can't get through my Occlumency shield."

"That's hardly a big deal. Just lower it."

"Funny, Snape. Thanks for that wonderful advice that I never would have thought of for myself," Harry snapped back. "I think you misunderstood. I can't get through to my Occlumency shield." He held up his burned hand with the runes clearly in sight.

Snape swore. "Some of your memories are gone?"

Harry gritted his teeth at the phrasing of that. The Occlumency training required blocking of part of your memories in order to organize another part, and none who went through that forgot how horrible it was to live with only a fraction of yourself, as the memories you could access were the only ones to draw a personality from. Luckily, each chunk of separated memories were weaved together, so to retrieve a section during meditation, you just had to relive one of each group.

Hopefully it was the same thing in this case, or they would be there for quite a while.

“Such a lovely way of putting it,” Harry snarled, and Snape looked momentarily apologetic.

“Maybe they're in that horridly organized trunk,” Minerva joked, not having studied so far into the Mind Arts and therefore not realizing the seriousness of it. “Seems like anything could get lost in there.”

Latching on to the hope (even if it was sarcastic) Harry desperately tried to envision the trunk he had seen amidst his amnesia, and, hoping that it worked as well as getting to the Chamber of Secrets, tried to transport them all there.

As his vision refocused, Harry ran for the trunk hastily opening the lid. He groaned as he looked at all the miscellaneous stuff crammed into it. “I should have listened to Hermione, and organized all my belongings. This really is ridiculous.

“What am I missing?” He softly asked himself. Since those memories were missing, and the ones that directly alluded to them were a bit fuzzy, Harry had no earthly clue which items would bring his memories back.

His hand snaked out to grab a Snitch that had tried to make a bid for freedom. No, he had all his memories of Quidditch and the practices, even the memory of the World Cup.

Releasing the Snitch, which began to circle and dart about the room, much to Severus's annoyance as it repeatedly flew into his line of vision to land on McGonagall's shoulder, Harry began to slowly grow through the items, discarding them to the side as he reviewed all the memories that the objects might represent.

But slowly, another stack collected a few items. Rare objects that brought a blank to Harry's mind, though thankfully these moments were few and far between, until the trunk was empty and a pile to Harry's right had three items in it.

“I have absolutely no idea what these are supposed to mean,” Harry said aloud, and picked up a small knickknack that was spherical in

shape but filled with a foggy purple mixture with green feathers decorating part of it, "let alone what some of these things are."

Testing the weight of the sphere in his hand, Harry tossed it up and down a few times, before rearing back and throwing it against the wall of the room.

"Potter!" Minerva yelled in shock. "What was that--"

She paused as a purple door appeared where Harry had thrown the object.

Harry next threw a bloody dagger at the wall, wincing as the room shuddered angrily when it pierced the wall until he apologized, and a brown sweater with horrid orange puffs covering it.

The sweater refused to fly through the air, though, until Harry stuffed it into a ball-like shape and lobbed it at the door, which was now a door with faded and scraped purple paint and a rusty door handle, as opposed to the disgustingly bright and purple door it had been after the first object.

The three looked at the door with obvious misgivings, before turning to look at each.

"I really don't want to go in there," Harry said, and the other two couldn't completely disagree with him.

"I myself am a bit anxious as to what the dagger represented," Minerva said, thinking it must represent memories of being held hostage by Voldemort.

"Forget the dagger," Harry responded. "I'm more worried about what that sweater represents."

"Regardless," Snape interrupted, "none of us have any intention of staying here forever, so through the door you must go."

“Yes, Yoda,” Harry retorted, before grabbing the handle door and opening it.

“Wait!” Minerva exclaimed. “Last time--”

But the sudden swirling wind cut off anything she was going to say, and all three were vacuumed through the door, none of them happy about the situation.

O--O

They landed in a room that didn't look too far off from the inside of the trunk. Harry looked around at the shelves of strange items and odd antiques, all basking under rewired neon lights and lamps of various shapes and sizes.

“This is wonderful,” Severus grumbled in the background. “We get to shadow a seventeen-year-old who’s trying to find his memories.”

“Shut up, Snape,” Harry said back. “It's not as if I wanted you here.”

“That's hardly a legitimate retort,” Snape answered loftily, but was interrupted before he could retort.

“Perhaps they caught some Snoozles and just kept them in the back,” a whimsical voice said, and Harry started as his own voice answered.

“ I surprised they don't have Huffalumps and Woozles here, actually.”

“Don't be silly, Harry, the Forbidden Forest is hardly one hundred acres,” Luna answered as they both rounded the corner of an aisle.

“How forgetful of me. Snoozles it is!” The other Harry answered, picking up a nearby stuffed animal and tossing it at Luna.

“Oh, is that the way this is going to be?” Luna picked up the animal and looked at Harry threateningly.

“Erm, yes?” Luna got a steely glint in her eye. “No! I said no!”

Luna laughed and tossed the animal back to Harry. “That's what I thought. Where are Hermione and Ronald?”

“Probably competing to see who can devour the most, either Ron with his chocolates or Hermione with her books.”

“My money's on Hermione.” Luna answered, looking at a glass bottle that looked like a pair of spectacles. “But with Ronald, you never know.”

“With what Ginny just did to Ron's food last night, I'd be surprised if he ever eats again,” Harry responded, fiddling with a small globe full of different colors of sand. Far from the Muggle jars of sand that had variations from pure white to deep brown, this one had colors from pale blue to dazzling orange.

The two teenagers looked at each, and then burst into laughter.

“Ronald not eating,” Luna said with a giggle. “And people call me insane.”

“Oy! I heard my name!” Ron poked his head above an aisle, easily as tall as the shelves. “And it had better only be mentioned in connection to the words 'roguishly handsome' or 'Supreme Wizard of All'.”

“Oh, yes, Ron,” Harry said, rolling his eyes while grinning at Luna. “You know I think you're roguishly handsome.”

“O Supreme Wizard of All, all of mankind bows down to you,” Luna added, placing a wig of green hair on Harry, who reciprocated by placing a piece of flesh-colored plastic over Luna's head to make her appear bald.

“Actually,” Ron said with a glare at Harry, “I'd be fine with a certain half of mankind proclaiming that.”

Ron winced as Hermione, who had apparently been standing nearby for quite sometime, cleared her throat. “I suggest specifying which half, by the way, and stand on that ladder properly before you break something.”

Harry and Luna snickered at Ron, but quickly subsided as Hermione turned to them. “And you two need to stop flirting so ridiculously. Even Neville's noticed you dancing around each other, and it takes a powerful amount of denial for him to realize something is going on.”

“Yes, Harry,” Luna pinned him down with a glare. “Stop flirting with me and ask me out. I have a busy schedule, you know. I won't stand for being ignored any longer.”

Harry grinned and struck a pose as if acting on stage.

“Oh Luna of my heart, I have wronged you in so long ignoring your beautiful blond locks, you deep soulful eyes, and your clanking Butterbeer necklace. Oh Luna of my heart, my soul has been pining for a reason I know not, until I'm once more graced with your presence. How could I ever have lived without you! And, um, well I can't ask you to Hogsmeade. We're here already and, er...”

“Cough-Christmas Ball-cough,” Hermione added without an ounce of subtlety.

“...so will you accompany me to the Christmas Ball?”

“Wonderful, Potter, absolutely stunning,” Snape commented.

“Oh, and where's the line of women waiting for you to ask them to a dance?” Harry retorted with a touch of embarrassment, and Minerva chuckled.

“And now that we're officially a couple, will you join me in our first act of completely terrorizing Ron and Hermione?” The other Harry continued.

“Certainly,” Luna answered with a malicious grin. “Most certainly.”

Ron shrieked (in quite a manly, Supreme Wizard of All type fashion) and disappeared behind the aisle as both him and Hermione charged for the exit.

Harry grinned as the memories of Luna came back. “So, that's one out of three. How do we get to the next one?”

There was no answer besides a shrug from Minerva. “It's your mind. We just came along for the ride.”

Harry grimaced. “And I'm oh so happy that you did so, by the way. Damn door.”

There was a tinkling sound of a bell far ahead as the four teens ran out of the shop, and the scene disappeared.

o--o

There was no light anywhere. Harry couldn't even tell that anyone had come with him.

“Professors?” He called softly.

“Here,” Minerva answered from his right, and a muttered comment Harry couldn't fully hear came from Snape further in that direction.

“Apparently,” Harry commented, trying to get rid of the oppressive feeling stifling him, “I was once trapped in a vortex.”

There was a far off feminine scream.

“Oh, my mistake. Potion's Class.”

Minerva chuckled at the poor joke, but subsided as voices came near.

"I think we should just kill the menace and be done with it," a harsh voice said, and Harry recognized it as belonging to Macnair. "Lumos."

"Tired of my company already?" A hoarse voice came behind the three of them, and they spun around to see another Harry glaring past them at the Death Eaters.

Minerva gasped at the sight, but Harry instinctively knew that this memory wasn't too far into how ever long he was with the Death Eaters.

There were several bloody wounds crossing his arms and face, but none had reached the point of infection just yet. The memory Harry was luckily still standing, though tremors coursing through his limbs made it obvious that the Cruciatus Curse was a frequent companion.

"Oh, look at that, the Boy-Who-Lived still hasn't made his escape," Lucius drawled as he stepped into the small cell Harry was in.

"I've been trying to get rid of that nickname for years," Harry said in response to Minerva's and Severus's questioning look. "The Wizarding World is nothing if not fond of putting people on pedestals."

"Oh, look at that," the memory Harry mocked. "Lucius Malfoy is still trying to pretend to be powerful."

"Crucio!" The blond Death Eater snarled in retort, and the red light hit Harry instantaneously.

Clenching his teeth as not to make a sound, Harry slid down the wall he had been leaning against, not able to stand under the power of the curse. Malfoy soon lifted it, looking pleased with himself, but Harry just opened his eyes and looked at him with disappointment.

"Come now, that hardly hurt at all, O great and powerful pureblood. Hermione's punches hurt more than that." Harry pretended to

disregard Lucius as a threat, and rubbed his head in remembrance. "Especially when mocking her knitting skills."

Lucius gritted his teeth, but didn't curse him again, something Severus looked curious about.

"They knew it would do no good," the real Harry responded as his memories began to filter back in. Truth be told, he was rather happier without them. "The more time they spent with me, the more I insulted them, and it was that much harder for them to not kill me. And only Voldemort was allowed to do that."

They watched, though, as the memory Harry slowly moved towards Malfoy, who was carelessly holding his wand loosely as the blond wizard seethed and ignored him.

Macnair winced as a pain shot through his arm. "I trust you can bring the whelp to our Lord yourself, Lucius. I apparently have something else to accomplish."

Malfoy looked slightly offended at the thought that he couldn't handle bringing Harry to Voldemort. "Go, Macnair, without further insulting my capability. Remember your place."

The executioner for the Ministry walked off muttering under his breath. "Potter was right. Malfoy should try those antidepressant pills. He seems awfully touchy lately."

Snape choked as he heard that comment, as Malfoy, who apparently heard it as well, glared at the retreating Death Eater.

The memory Harry made his move, springing at Malfoy with his hand outstretched to grab the wand. Unfortunately, Malfoy turned at the last second and saw Harry's movement.

Both tightened their grip on the wand, but Harry, who was moving out of desperation, had the stronger pull to point the wand at Malfoy's face.

“Reducto!” Harry rasped, and Malfoy's eyes widened.

But the blond aristocrat moved his head out of the way, and the hex shattered the nearby stone wall. Flecks and knife-like pieces of stone came flying at them, peppering both with small cuts and scratches.

Attracted by the explosion, three Death Eaters came running, with their wands pointed straight at Harry.

“Deshmaj!” One hissed, and a sickly purple light hit Harry, pushing him into the back wall with all the force of a rampaging elephant. His head banged against the stone until the Death Eaters became nothing more than blurry spots.

Malfoy snarled in anger. “Son of a--”

“Now, now,” Harry said groggily, his vision slowly restoring. “Don't go insulting my mum. She defeated your master after all.”

The Death Eaters, apparently fed up with Harry by now, bound him with magical chains, and then levitated him out of the cell.

Minerva was still surveying the area with wide eyes, as if not expecting being a prisoner of Voldemort to be like what she had seen.

“Damn,” the real Harry muttered as the Death Eaters and the prisoner disappeared. “That spell had hurt. I can't wait to use it back on him.”

Snape smirked. “They really didn't like you, did they?”

“Not at all,” Harry grinned evilly. “Most hadn't ever held a conversation with me before, but they hated me after we did.”

“You realize that you probably wouldn't have been in such bad shape if you kept your mouth closed,” Minerva said shakily.

Harry shrugged. “Then they would have thought they won, and I couldn't have that. I wasn't the only one to get away with it, though.

All the other prisoners knew that they would die faster if they ran their mouths off, so it became kind of a fad to insult the Death Eaters until they got sick of us.”

“They wanted to die quicker?” Minerva repeated, as if she hadn't heard right.

Harry turned to look at her with darkened eyes. “If you knew there was no hope of escaping, wouldn't you?”

The memory disappeared before Minerva had any chance to answer.

o--o

Minerva had been dragged through tunnels, a mind, Hogwarts, a secret of chamber of Slytherin's, a junk shop, and a dungeon. She had not expected to suddenly appear in a park.

A park in a conspicuously Muggle area.

“GET HIM!”

The battle cry came from a dozen seven-year-old voices, a pack that was currently chasing another child across a road leading to the nearby park. The current prey of the pack headed straight for where Minerva, Severus, and Harry were standing, an expression of tolerance and annoyance on his face.

Harry groaned as he recognized his seven-year-old self. “Kill!” He exclaimed through hands covering his face in mortification. “Kill them all! Of all the memories to go through...”

Minerva looked at the situation. Being a teacher for several years had made her intuitive to situations that only children (and Marauders) could instigate. Apparently, Harry was not at all friendly with this small group of peers.

“What did you do to make them chase you?” Minerva asked, thinking herself accurate in blaming Harry for the mischief.

"I didn't do anything!" Harry protested as the memories came back to him. Both professors looked at him skeptically. "Okay, well maybe I did, but usually they would just try to beat me up for the fun of it!"

"Oh, really?" Minerva's disbelief couldn't be any more evident.

"Yes, really," Harry argued back, though a small grin was on his face. "The big, fat one is my cousin Dudley. He never liked me, and since he's the leader of this little gang, no one else liked me either. Occasionally I fought back. Just a little, though."

The seven-year-old Harry, meanwhile, had climbed up on top of the monkey bars, and was mockingly laughing at the pack of children roving about below.

"Of course. You didn't egg them on at all, Potter," Snape said sarcastically.

"Well, I don't really remember this encounter at the moment, so I don't know what's going on."

"Potter!" Piers Polkiss yelled, and the older Harry made a face of disgust. "Get down from there and face us with some pride!"

"Why?" Harry responded. "My lofty height is representative of how much more evolved I am than you, and you can go find your own pride without taking mine!"

The pack regrouped for a moment, evidently puzzling over the meaning of the word lofty.

After the group had come up with another plan, one of the group stepped forward, clearing his throat as if preparing to sing.

"Your mom!" The boy yelled in a mocking tone, but Harry merely raised one eyebrow.

The rest of them took up the chant as the sun began to set. "Your mom! Your mom!"

The older Harry couldn't help laughing with his younger self. "Ah, the merry band of idiots," he recalled bitterly.

"They don't seem like that much of a threat," Minerva observed as the younger Harry took a book out of his pocket and began to read atop the monkey bars, and Dudley and his friends began to drift off in boredom.

"They weren't unless they caught me, and then I was toast. Oh, now I remember what this was about! Yesterday was Halloween and I had taken a hose to Polkiss's mummy costume," Harry cackled as the memory drifted away and they were brought back to the room with the trunk. "That taught him not to make fun of Mandy."

Harry quieted and felt for his Occlumency Shields once more. Tentatively putting his hand on it, Harry smiled as it went through. "About time," he said out loud, "my shields are fixed. We should be able to get out of here."

Minerva frowned, as she realized that she still hadn't come up with a way to tell everyone what they had found out. She looked at Severus, who sneered but nodded his head. Of course. She might have gotten distracted, but he wouldn't.

Harry's grin slipped off his face as the side-effect of euphoria after finding his memories wore off, and he became grounded firmly in reality once more. The reality that Snape and McGonagall had had unrestricted access to his mind for hours.

"How far did you get into my mind?" Harry asked directly, narrowing his eyes at them threateningly.

Minerva gulped at the look. "Erm, well, these spirits of your personality began leading us around. One led us to a memory of you and Miss Lovegood harassing Slytherins and preparing to burn them in effigy."

Harry chuckled, amused that his inbuilt defenses worked, even under Justern poison, to choose the most worthless memories for perusal. "And what a scene it was. I think I got more death threats that week than any other time. What else did you see?"

"There was another one where, erm..." Minerva elected to fall silent, and Harry didn't take that as good news.

"You've seen me ask Luna out on a date, seen me harass Death Eaters, Slytherins, seven-year-olds, and Lockharts, and you still expect to be bothered by you two being dragged into any of my memories? As far as I can tell, it's nearly impossible to get much more blackmail."

"We saw you destroy Dumbledore's office." Snape said suddenly, putting an end to the argument.

Harry's eyes darkened. Maybe the defenses need a little work still. "So that's how you found out..." He glared at Snape, who merely raised an eyebrow. "I'd rather you not mention that memory to anyone."

"No can do, Potter. Come, let's go prepare for the bloody battle ahead."

Harry laughed bitterly. "The one with the Basilisk, or the one where James completely disowns me?"

Minerva stopped as if slapped. "Well that's a horrible way to put it, Potter. You have to try and understand everything from their point of view. They suddenly have a Dark Wizard, who made no prior effort to be overly friendly, claim to be the child they saw dead years ago. Not exactly a situation anyone could simply waltz into calmly."

Harry looked at her, eyes full of sorrow and self-hatred. "No, I really don't have to understand their point of view, because I still don't want them to know who I am. I previously refused to tell them my identity for one reason. I already knew that they wouldn't want to have

anything to do with me, but I just didn't want them any higher up on Voldemort's To Maim, Torture, and Kill List.”

With that final statement, Harry brought down his Occlumency shields, and went back to the land of the living, Minerva and Severus following.

Chapter 12: Yet Almost Completely Orchestrated

FLASHBACK

"Hermione, we've been through this," Ron said in an aggravated tone. "Harry and I refuse to do extra credit!"

"I fail to see why not Ronald," Hermione said, "seeing as that is exactly what you are doing. Failing."

Harry chuckled in the background, having meekly agreed to do the essay.

Unlike Ron, who decided to butt heads with the force of nature that is 'Hermione studying.'

"Fine, fine, I see your point. Shut up, Harry," Ron grumbled, dragging out a piece of parchment and a pen. Hermione's constant talk about Muggle culture had only resulted in one change in Ron--he now used pens instead a quill and ink. "But why does it have to be an essay over circumstantial control and memory charms? It doesn't get more boring than that."

"Actually, Ron," Harry said in a voice similar of Hermione's, "this particular incantation is very interesting. Its original translation was Nordic. Isn't that fascinating? It also says-- Ow!"

Harry rubbed the bump on his head left from Hermione's rather large book.

"And it's Scandinavian, stupid prat," Hermione grumbled.

"Oh, my mistake, Hermione," he apologized, grinning, before getting back to work. "Actually it is kind of interesting. The person it's cast on can't reveal certain knowledge without full willingness. Confundus Charm, torture, memory charm, nothing can work against it. This is actually pretty good," he said, scribbling down the information and missing Ron's look of horror.

"Not another Hermione! Ow!"

The redhead felt very put-upon as he rubbed the two bumps on his head from the thrown books of his amused friends.

As Harry moved on to other books, the book lay open, a certain passage read without comment but with a mental note.

“The Nordusci Secret Charm has almost no weaknesses known to Wizardkind... Magical amnesia, personality-altering potions, or logical connection of clues can lead a searcher to the Charm User's identity... However, no one who discovers the Charm User's identity can reveal the secret to anyone else unless the spell has been lifted...”

END FLASHBACK

Harry opened his eyes, swallowing a groan at the residual pain in his shoulder and ribs. They ached horribly, but nothing like the sharp sting any of Madam Pomfrey's remedies would produce. Slowly rising into a sitting position, he realized that he was in the Hospital Wing, with McGonagall and Snape in two beds across from him.

He grimaced as he thought back to what McGonagall had just said. “Well that's a horrible way to put it, Potter. You have to try and understand everything from their point of view. They suddenly have a Dark Wizard, who made no prior effort to be overly friendly, claim to be the child they saw dead years ago. Not exactly a situation anyone could simply waltz into calmly.”

That was not the reaction he had wanted, though he had somewhat expected it. He had known that, sometime soon, he would need to tell a couple people about his identity, in the very likely chance that Voldemort was able to figure it out. With some people already knowing, it wouldn't cause nearly as much damage as it would if nobody knew at all.

During the last two days, when he had gotten somewhat used to being in an alternate universe, he had started to come up with a battle plan. He had spent hours in the Room of Requirement, making notes, reading newspapers, and creating contingency plans on how

to break through Voldemort's forces, and how hiding his identity would impact the war.

A short time that day, right after the victorious battle with Mrs. Norris, he had come up with a list of possible people to tell. Minerva McGonagall, though she wasn't overly fond of him, was a force to be reckoned with, and if she knew something, very few would argue with her. Flitwick, he didn't know that well. Moody...well, that situation would most likely result in Harry being threatened and forced into telling everyone who he was, spell or no spell. His parents, sisters, and the Marauders were definitely off the list, seeing as how the whole point of the trickery was to keep them from knowing and off of the top ten spots on Voldemort's People Who Are Annoying and Must be Eradicated List. There was no way in Hell he'd tell Dumbledore or any of the Aurors, and that left Snape.

Snape, while not trusted by most, was most definitely a force to reckon with in an argument.

So Harry had planned on telling those two people his identity sometime in the near future, and being poisoned by a Justern, while unorthodox, had finished the job. Not to mention squelching any lingering distrust between the three after they had been traipsing about in his memories.

The next bridge to cross, Harry thought as McGonagall and Snape began to sit up as well, is dodging the hexes when they realize they can't tell anyone.

“Well, I suppose your mission was successful?” Madam Pomfrey spoke suddenly as she came out of her office with her hands on her hips.

For a frightening second, Harry thought she was talking to him, and that his mind had been wide open to reading. But McGonagall answered. “Yes, and your patient is still in one piece, Poppy. No need to be overly protective.”

Madam Pomfrey made an hmphing sound at the thought that she was being overly protective, and her gaze fell on Harry.

“ So much for not liking hospitals, Collins,” the mediwitch commented. “You keep coming back.”

“Trust me, it's not my decision,” Harry said, and got off the bed, glaring defiantly at Poppy who was about to order him to lie back down. “Justern poison evaporates as soon as it enters the bloodstream and starts the effects. I healed my shoulder and ribs. Is there any reason why I would have to stay here?”

Madam Pomfrey glared back. Instinct to keep her patients in the Hospital Wing until she was sure all injuries were gone warred with the logic and the need for the Chamber of Secrets to be emptied of threat. “No,” she said doubtfully, “I don't suppose there is.”

Severus followed this conversation with narrowed eyes. Potter had said he didn't even know what a Justern was... how could he possibly know anything about its poison?

He began to have a very bad feeling about this.

Dumbledore walked through the door at that moment, his customary good humor in place. “I see everyone has returned to the real world without harm. Minerva, could I speak to you for a moment?”

Minerva followed Albus back at the door, looking back once at Severus and Collins. The next few minutes would surely be interesting.

Unknown to her, as she left and Madam Pomfrey went to her office to work on whatever she kept in there. (No one in the history of Hogwarts had seen Madam Pomfrey's office, and it was a complete mystery as to what she did in there all day. Several running bets had accumulated throughout the years, most thinking of bizarre and slightly lascivious situations. Harry on the other, thought she spent all her time making up code names and placing bets on herself) Harry thought the exact same sentiment, albeit with a small smirk on his face.

Severus saw the look, and began to have a very, very bad feeling about this.

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Minerva followed Dumbledore out the Hospital Wing door, her mind a whirl with thoughts. Before she could open her mouth to begin, however, Fawkes landed on her shoulder from his position near the Hospital Wing doors. Unlike most times when the phoenix greeted people with a welcoming trill, Fawkes sang a chirping laugh that gave Minerva the distinct impression she was being made fun of.

Albus looked at his familiar oddly, and not just a bit scoldingly, before turning back to her. "I trust the mission was successful?"

"Yes," she answered, biting down on her lower lip. "Severus I found the location of the Chamber of Secrets, but we also found out that, well..." Her throat spasmed and her mind went to a completely different topic, one that she hadn't meant to mention right now at all, "Lockhart was apparently the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor when it was opened."

Albus's eyes twinkled. "Well, that certainly is an interesting scenario. The Divination professor didn't happen to go by the name of 'Cleo', did she?"

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Severus waited until Poppy had shut her office door before turning towards Harry.

"What was that, Potter?" Severus snapped, and Harry tried to fix an innocent look on his face, though he was sure that a smirk was ruining the effect.

"What was what, Professor?"

“You said earlier that you didn't know anything about a Justern, yet now you know about its poison?” Snape growled as Harry's smirk widened. “Explain.”

“I knew it was a Justern as soon as I saw it and it slashed me with its claws. Trust me, any plan I had did not include getting poisoned, but it worked out rather well.”

“Plan? What plan, Potter?” Severus asked, with a feeling like the answer was closing in on him. “If you knew the effects of being poisoned, then you knew someone would have to enter your mind to get you out, finding your identity along the way. You also had to have known that Minerva or myself would be sent... but why would you want your identity to be found out? And why did you react like you didn't want to be found out?”

Harry nearly cackled as Snape began to put it all together. “Have you heard of the Memory Cognition Spell?”

“No.” Yes, he had, but the Dark Lord was the only one who had ever mentioned it before. He tucked that fact into his mind, fully preparing to pick up that train of thought later.

“It protects your mind from invasion by letting you choose which memories can be seen by a foreign entity, as well as allowing you to string two unrelated memories together to further protect them. Basically, like a cheat for Occlumency.”

Snape's expression was getting stormier and stormier as he listened, and Harry began to imperceptibly edge towards Madam Pomfrey's office.

Just in case.

“So I put the memory of destroying Dumbledore's office to the front of my mind before the poison took effect, knowing you would need the clues to put it all together. I also attached my memories of this plan to my memories of Luna, so I wouldn't remember them when you made your discovery. Voila, instant acting skills.”

“But what was the point to this whole charade?” Snape snapped. “You want Minerva and I to know your identity, but not for anyone else to?”

“Precisely,” Harry answered, and Snape snorted at Harry's apparent naivety. “I needed someone to know in case Voldemort ever figured it out, or I died, or I really got amnesia. Basically just as a fail-safe.”

“And what exactly makes you think Minerva and I won't tell everyone?”

Harry grinned evilly, and Severus's earlier feeling was magnified ten-fold. “Ah, this is where my plan was easy to concoct. Try to say my name.”

Snape glared. “I fail to see how saying your name will make me not tell anyone, Potter.”

“Good.” Harry opened the Hospital Door just enough to hear a bit of Minerva and Dumbledore's conversation come through. “Now try to say it again.”

Snape maintained his glare but complied. “Collins.”

The Potions Master's eyes widened and he pulled out his wand to point it threateningly at Harry as the door fell shut once more. “What was that, Potter?”

“You can't tell anyone my name, and you can't force me to, either,” Harry answered with a smug tone. “It's the Nordusci Secret Charm.”

Severus's hand clenched his wand as if wanting to hex Harry anyway, silently muttering to himself before glaring in defeat and putting his wand away. “The Nordusci Charm. I knew we should have removed that book. How long have you been planning this?”

“Two or three days.”

The closest expression to approval possible briefly crossed Snape's face. "Congratulations, Potter. I suppose the thought that you belonged in Slytherin wasn't just a fluke after all."

Harry grinned, relieved that Snape wasn't going to kill him. "Thanks, but I don't think McGonagall is going to be as approving."

"Approving?" Snape repeated, rolling the word in his mouth as if the thought hadn't occurred to him. "Approving? Oh, no, you owe me Potter. And I have enough blackmail to back that up for years."

Harry gaped silently before cursing his luck in such a way that would even put the Weasley twins to shame.

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Minerva excused herself as soon as Albus told her to bring Severus and Co—Potter to his office, where everyone was reconvening. Breathing harshly as her frustration got the best of her, she pulled out her wand and burst through the Hospital Wing door.

"CHRIS COLLINS!" She bellowed, before she paused with a confused expression, and then glared severely at Harry once more. Harry, by the way, had elected to hide behind Snape and a row of beds. The door swung shut as McGonagall began to yell once more. "What did you do, Potter?"

Severus smirked and rubbed his hands together in glee. Not only did he have an excuse to kill a member of the Potter family, he had help.

"Me?" Harry asked innocently, barely poking his head above the farthest bed from Minerva. "I didn't do anything. You just can't tell anyone my identity."

Minerva hissed in anger, making both Harry and Snape stumble backwards. "And why, pray tell, not?"

“The Nordusci Charm,” Snape told her, and a look of frustrated regret passed over Minerva's face. “Damn Dumbledore. I told him we should get rid of that book.”

“I personally didn't find anything wrong with the book,” Harry commented, and ducked as a fireball shot out of Minerva's wand.

Straight at Harry's head.

“Now that was uncalled for.” Harry rounded the beds to walk closer to the front of the room. He very much doubted that anything would be able to protect him. “I have my reasons for not wanting anyone to know who I am.”

“Then why tell us?” The Transfiguration Professor asked, her anger gone and replaced by confusion. “If you don't want anyone to know, then what was the point?”

“Just in case,” Harry asked with an orchestrated careless shrug. “Aren't we supposed to go to Dumbledore's office or something?”

But Minerva didn't let it go, even as the three left the Hospital Wing. “Just in case of what?”

“Destruction, imminent death, so you know not to take my young age for incompetence. Or so you can vouch for me if I ever do need to tell everyone else who I am,” Harry answered in a light voice. “Probably also to drive you insane, knowing that you can't tell anyone something you really want to tell them.”

“Now that sounds like a Potter,” Snape commented snarkily.

“Yes, of course, that was the last reason. So Snape can mock me even more. Lemon heads.”

Harry stepped onto the revolving staircase, wandlessly tying Snape's shoe laces together so he would trip upon entering Dumbledore's office.

There was already a small crowd forming as Harry entered the office. Grinning evilly as the noise tapered off so everyone could turn around and stare, Harry turned around and quickly pulled Minerva out of the way.

“Collins!” She snapped. “What--”

“Oof!”

The witch was cut off as Snape tried to step into the office, only to trip and fall forward amid guffaws from the Marauders and Prewitt brothers. Harry fixed a (believably) innocent look on his face, and Minerva decided to copy his demeanor, pretending that she didn't acknowledge Harry as responsible.

“Collins,” Snape growled as he undid the jinx on his shoes, not even bothering to look at Harry's expression. “You had best hope that that Basilisk kills you.”

“Now, now, Severus,” Albus said with twinkling eyes. “I have no doubt you did something to deserve it. Now,” Albus hurriedly settled into his chair as everyone else also became situated and Snape gave up glaring, “Mr. Collins,” Minerva coughed, hiding the grimace on her face, “can you tell us the location of the Chamber of Secrets?”

Harry swallowed his impulse to reply with just a “yes” and said, “It's in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.”

Apparently the group's trust in Harry had recently gone downhill, as they all didn't act like he was serious and instead pinned him with unnerved glances.

“Funny, Collins,” Peter said, rolling his eyes and missing Harry's resulting murderous glare. “How did you find out about that trick Peeves played on us?”

“What are you talking about, Pettigrew?” Harry asked scathingly. “There is no tri--ah.”

Harry nodded in realization in what was afoot. Peeves and Myrtle, in his world, had decided to get involved in romantic entanglements, and were no doubt they were beginning to do so here. Standing up and walking over to the office door, Harry pressed a symbol and spoke into it. "Peeves—you're busted. Get yourself in Dumbledore's office before I tell everyone what really happened to those 17 House-Elves."

The others in the room had watched in confusion as Harry walked over to Dumbledore's door, and were now curious as Harry's voice echoed throughout the castle.

"How do you know which symbols are which?" Sirius asked with an air of preparing to take mental notes, and Albus's eyes widened in horror.

Harry grinned and began to answer. "Well, it all began in 1847 when a dragon--"

"I believe it's high time we got back to business," Dumbledore announced, clearing his throat nervously. "Mr. Collins, you and I will need to have a talk later."

"Yes, sir," Harry said with a straight face as Peeves burst through the wall.

"Crazy Collins!" The poltergeist yelped, pointing a finger at Harry. "Peevsey has done nothing to any Housy-Elves."

"Uh huh, sure, Peeves," Harry muttered as he sat back down. "How long have you had a crush on Myrtle?"

And for the very first time in recorded history, Peeves the Poltergeist had been shocked into silence as the six known trouble-makers in the room guffawed at Peeves' strangled look.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Harry turned back to the others. "The Chamber of Secrets is in Myrtle's bathroom. You lot have just been fooled by two very immature ghosts."

“That's just grand,” Minerva piped up sarcastically. “Severus and I are gone for not even an hour and all the minds go out the window.”

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They all sat in silence, as each pondered the best way to defeat the Basilisk. Harry's suggestion of throwing the Sorting Hat at it and locking the door had been met with a very loud protest from the Hat in question, and was summarily dismissed. As was the Prewitt brother's idea, in which no one had even bothered to listen to before putting their feet down. James's idea of trapping Harry in with the Basilisk until he annoyed it to death was dismissed.

“What?” James said indignantly, trying to defend his plan. “I see absolutely nothing wrong with that!”

“Potter,” Harry said calmly, though his eyes were glinting with amusement. “I swear -- imminent humiliation. One more word, I swear to Merlin, and you will not like the consequences.”

“Aha!” James exclaimed. “Threat! Did you hear that Albus? That was a definite threat!”

Harry rolled his eyes and glared menacingly at his father, his eyes darkening and narrowing, baring his teeth slightly.

James responded by trippingly stepping backwards until he fell back into his chair.

“Damn,” he whispered to Remus. “That was very unfriendly.”

He turned to look at his friend only to see the werewolf giving him the exact same look as Harry had, and James yelped. “What is this!” He demanded. “A werewolf thing?”

“No,” Sirius responded, not even bothering to look up. “Minerva can do it, too.”

“You'd better believe it,” Minerva said, looking immensely pleased with herself. “Now, can we get back to the issue on hand, children?”

And the group fell into silence once more.

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Sirius let out a quiet snicker, which evolved in chuckles, which soon enough developed into full-blown laughter.

“Mr. Black?” Albus asked calmly, though a faint gleam in his eye showed minor (and slightly murderous) annoyance. “Something to share?”

Sirius waved his wand, muttering under his breath, until a rooster appeared.

And then another rooster, followed by another and another.

After thirty seconds, the room was full to the brim with cawing, cackling, scratching, pecking roosters. “Black,” Snape growled as a gang of roosters surrounded him. “Your penchant for twisted ideas,” and Sirius took a mock bow, “is only outdone by the absolute stupidity that made you consider conjuring the roosters in here.”

“SNIVELLUS! Squawk!” The gang of roosters crowed in stereo. “GREASY GIT! SNIVELLUS!”

Harry bit his lip, trying to keep from bursting out into laughter.

“So, not only are we going to defeat a horrible monster with roosters, they're genetically-engineered roosters.”

“GREASY Squawk!”

“Ta cha, Collins,” Sirius responded grandly. “And that is the Marauder edge.”

He immediately dived down to avoid a jet of suspiciously Concussion-like red light.

“And that,” Snape said as he hit Sirius with a Stunner and all the roosters disappeared, “would be the Sane edge.”

“Ta cha,” Minerva seconded, not quite bringing herself to say 'Hallelujah'.

“Roosters.” Lily looked at everyone with an expression of disbelief. “We're going to invade the Chamber with an army of chickens, are we?”

She bit her lip as no one responded and sighed. “Roosters it is, then. But this time,” she glared at Sirius as Remus removed the Stunner, “lay off the conjuring until we get there.”

“Yes, ma'am!” Sirius answered brilliantly, and then they were serious, following after Harry as he led the way to the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry walked down the, while not familiar, easily-memorable path to Myrtle's bathroom, thinking about his next step to take in this world. Minerva and Snape, while not overly thrilled with him, at least knew his identity. While in the Room of Requirement he had spent quite a bit of time fruitlessly searching for a way back to his world. As his search went into dustier and darker tomes, Harry came to the conclusion that it is was impossible to go back. According to a book on Veritaserum, Harry should by all rights be dead. The Truth Potion, if fought for too long, would damage the nervous system and brain, causing almost instant death.

It seemed that the only thing to save him had been the Prophecy. Apparently force-feeding him a potion without wanting to kill Harry didn't count as by Voldemort's hand since the intent wasn't there. So while refusing Veritaserum did break a rule of magic, most were dead before they were sent to an alternate universe.

Eventually, Harry had come to the conclusion, in a mental voice that disturbingly sounded a lot like Hermione, that the only way to go back to his home was to kill himself and hope to land in the right dimension. If all the theories were right, there could be an infinite number of universes.

Harry didn't like those odds.

Armed with the knowledge that he was stuck here, Harry had laid the foundations for beginning to fight Voldemort. Right now, his short-term goal was to completely destroy Malfoy's power in the government. Helpful, if not as crucial in his original universe, satisfying, on a scale of pure revenge, and completely immature.

It was lucky that no one could see the murderous grin on his face.

Harry stopped outside Myrtle's bathroom, and clearing his mind of his thoughts, pushed open the door and walked over to the sinks.

"Which one?" He asked himself softly, not remembering which of the sinks had the small snake engraved in it. Glancing up briefly to see the strange looks he was getting, Harry continued the search the sinks, until he gave up and decided to search a different way. He turned the sink he was in front of, and began circling, grumbling as sink after sink worked until he reached one that squeaked and groaned, and didn't let so much as a drop of water through, Sure enough, there was a snake on that very one.

"Off," he hissed at the sinks to hide the use of wandless magic to turn off the water. "Open."

Quite a few in the group jumped in shock as Harry hissed, then again as the sinks began to screech and rotate, leaving a dark hole in the middle.

"Professor, would you like to go first?" Harry asked Minerva, mock-politely. The stately witch responded by grinning and pushing Harry into it.

“You first, Collins.”

Harry, who had expected the action, snapped off a small salute as he fell down the steep slide and onto the rodent-skeleton covered floor below.

Despite the strong and slightly manic impulse to cast *Sonorus* on himself and start hissing in Parseltongue so the others would be afraid to come down, Harry pulled out his wand and began cleaning the passageway. He magically cleared all of the skeleton and sent streams of molten rock at the walls, creating more of a pathway than an earthen tunnel. As the rock began to cool quickly, Harry carved some basic runes into it, the only kinds he could understand from Hermione's highbrow explanations. One that disbanded all portkeys, one that canceled all visually-altering charms, and one that Hermione had created herself, that, oddly enough, made perfect sense.

Harry turned around as Snape slid down the slide next. Not even giving the Potions Master a chance to glare, Harry threw Snape at the wall before sealing Hermione's rune.

“Collins!” Snape snapped as Dumbledore came down the slide next, smiling and looking as if he had just had the time of his life. “An explanation, if you please.”

Harry pointed at the rune marks in the corner of the wall. “Hermione created one-- don't even give me those disbelieving looks, she was a genius, bloody annoying at times -- that would somehow incapacitate any Death Eater. You're the only one allowed, Snape, and you should be glad about that. That girl could be vicious if she had a mind to be.”

Snape sneered as more and more people came down the slide, all looking at the muck on the robes in disgust. “I hardly doubt that Granger would arm anything with something more dangerous than a Babbling Hex.”

Harry laughed. “Remind me to tell you about the time you confiscated her copy of *Hogwarts, A History* for taking it outside in the snow. Hermione is bloody mean when she wants to.” He shuddered in

remembrance of Ron and him shutting Crookshanks out of the Gryffindor Common, only to have Hermione find the howling cat.

Clearing up the slime in the tunnel with a wave of his wand, Harry led the way farther down the tunnel, cleaning the floor as he went, deciding that he would have to leave the walls for later.

“Oy, look,” Harry heard James mutter. “There's a greasy git imprint in the wall. I wonder if Slytherin did that himself.”

Harry's lips twitched furiously at that comment, and, looking behind him, he saw a great majority of the group trying to hide the same reaction.

He held up an arm to stop everyone's progress. “Around the bend there should be a Basilisk skin that has been shed. Please, don't destroy it in thinking it to be alive.”

Forewarned, the members of the Order didn't even react to the skin. Harry quickly rolled it up, doing it manually as any spell would have reflected off of it, and foisted it off on McGonagall.

“Heavy... dratted snake skin...” she muttered before foisting it off on Peter. “Here, you take it.”

Harry snickered as everyone now backed away from Peter, unwilling to carry the heavy, slick, and “dratted” skin. Raising an eyebrow incredulously, Peter Banished the snake skin up the far away slide.

Despite the cheerful and ribbing journey through the tunnel, everyone got decidedly uneasy at the sight of the emerald-eyed snakes on the entrance to the actual Chamber.

“Everyone knows the properties of Basilisks, right?” Lily asked in a hoarse voice, rhetorically. Sure, they all, or some, acted constantly immature, but they all knew what they were doing.

“Get ready,” Harry said, “and open.”

Nobody even spared a moment to wince as the hiss left Harry's mouth. All eyes were trained on the door, and the ominous slithering sound behind it.

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Everyone's first thought that the room was dark, impenetrably so. Harry flicked his wand towards a torch he knew to be on the wall, and watched with resigned eyes as the room that had nearly claimed Ginny Weasley's life came into view. He jerked his head towards the sound of scales slipping over rock, only to see the Basilisk's tail slip from view.

“Everyone, look out--there's pipes all around this room that connect to each other. It could show up anywhere.”

Minerva waved her wand in a complicated maneuver, muttering softly until gray cement started pouring out her wand. She pointed it at a nearby tunnel and slowly but efficiently sealed the opening, making sure that nothing could get through. “Let's give it only one opening, then.”

They all nodded and spread silently out, two to each group. The Prewitt Brothers started conjuring questionable items to block the tunnels with, but no one dared question the efficiency—there was no doubt that whatever they concocted would work.

Harry walked swiftly over to the statue of Slytherin and sealed the mouth shut, as he knew that it contained a majority of the tunnels that lead to the school. From there he started sealing the tunnels as well, leaving one bare and inviting. It was the one the serpent had sneaked out of five years ago to attack Harry, a perfectly hidden point that was perfect for surprising an enemy. Harry knew without a doubt that the Basilisk would use it.

Harry continued his spellwork, though keeping one eye on the tunnel.

“Wizards...fresh meat...invading the sanctity...”

Harry sent out a spell that poked everyone on the shoulder and pointed at the snake statue hiding the tunnel, and everyone rushed forward to form a semicircle around the tunnel.

Waiting, with wands at the ready.

They were not disappointed as the Basilisk shot out of the tunnel, jaw open and fangs outstretched to attack.

“Pullus Prodeo!” They all shouted.

“Fama 'Snivellus'!” Sirius whispered, as he tacked the phrase to the end of his spell, only to get a sharp elbow to the stomach from McGonagall, who had overheard.

The roosters crowed, all unhappy with the sudden entrance to life that, far from being the life of other other roosters, began in front of a murderous magical serpent.

Everyone went from looks of concentration to make sure their spells worked, to thunderstruck horror as the Basilisk looked nothing more than annoyed.

“GREASY SQUAWK!”

Everyone, the other fowl included, fell silent at that proclamation. Until the Basilisk dived and scooped the offending rooster into its mouth, swallowing it and looking at the other birds in hunger.

“Stop!” Harry hissed commandingly, and the Basilisk swiveled its head downward, though plainly still listening to Harry. Riddle, Harry decided, must have trained the snake well. “You will surrender and not harm a single person here!”

The Basilisk, seemingly on the verge of cooperating, whipped out its tongue and sniffed the air. “You are not my Master's heir,” it hissed warningly.

“Er, any ideas anyone?” Peter asked in English, as the snake hissed angrily at Collins, though none could understand the conversation. “Perhaps sacrifice Snape?”

They all winced again as Harry hissed back fiercely and commandingly, his eyes seething.

The Basilisk reared back and aimed its jaws at Collins, who barely managed to roll out of the way. “Damned snake,” Harry muttered. The serpent refused to act like Harry was any sort of authority, and he knew that Basilisk would turn its killing gaze to them soon.

“Professor, you have all those books about magical creatures in your office, right?” Harry asked as he melted and then froze the rock the Basilisk had lunged at, temporarily sticking its teeth there as an idea formed in his head. Fawkes wouldn't come with Harry, but the phoenix had done so last time Dumbledore had been insulted and defended in the Chamber.

“Yes, Mr. Collins,” Albus responded with a hint of curiosity in his face.

“And you didn't spare the time through your idiotic addiction to lemon drops to actually look at them?” Harry all but snarled, but his lips twitched as everyone immediately leaped for his throat.

“Show some respect, Collins!” Moody roared.

“You have no right to insult Albus!” Lily shrieked. “He's the reason we've even survived so long against Voldemort!”

“There's never been—” “Who do you think you are--” “The most intelligent wizard in history--”

Dumbledore, Harry noted, looked resigned and amused at the same time as everyone verbally attacked Harry, quite easily seeing through the ploy.

They all stilled as Fawkes appeared, swooping down from the ceiling and trilling happily just as the Basilisk freed itself.

The snake jerked its head in the direction of the Phoenix, interpreting it to be the nearest danger. Fawkes didn't even have time to lunge towards the Basilisk's eyes before the serpent snapped at him, making the bird swoop to avoid the jaws.

Harry watched as Lily and Peter crept around the edge of the Chamber to get behind the Basilisk. They began to cover the edge of the serpent's tail in the same cement material as before, obviously attempting entrap it in stone.

The idea had merit, but Harry knew it wouldn't work. The Basilisk was moving too erratically for them to move far up the body. Fawkes, also, wouldn't be able to kill the Basilisk for them. Phoenixes were only allowed to interfere in the affairs of wizards a small amount before an innate sense commanded them to stop.

The only thing left, short of a sword, which Harry had no inclination to try again, was to find some way of making the roosters kill the Basilisk. Obviously, conjured fowl wouldn't work, not even Sirius "genetically engineered" monstrosities. Living things beyond a certain size and distance couldn't be Summoned, and none of them had time to run onto the grounds and track down one of Hagrid's roosters. What did that leave?

Harry looked up as Fawkes finally managed to gouge out the Basilisk's eyes. Now the serpent was only slightly less dangerous and angrily in pain to boot. Lily and Peter were still trying to restrain the tail, and a good portion of the others were creating magical nets so the Basilisk wouldn't be able to move very far.

The Prewitt brothers were throwing brightly colored objects in the Basilisk's mouth, things Harry was quite sure he didn't want to know the purpose of, when the serpent freed its tail from the cement with a snap, and the Lily and Peter were whipped in the air, to come crashing down fifteen meters away.

He had to stop this.

“Accio!” He snapped, and the skeleton of a rooster zoomed in from the tunnel leading to the Chamber of Secrets. Harry knew that there had to have been someone who tried to kill the Basilisk, and the remains of the rooster proved it.

Placing the skeleton on the ground before him, Harry dragged his wand on the stone floor to form a circle, and the gray outline showed where Harry had traced. He began tracing Latin into the air as he said the same word in Parseltongue.

“Aevum mortuus super quem Rego!” He hissed commandingly, and the inside of the circle flashed with a moldy green light, attracting the attention of Dumbledore.

As Harry cut his palm with the tip of his wand to complete the spell, he looked up to see Dumbledore's horror-filled eyes lock onto his.

“Inferius!” Harry finished, ignoring the Headmaster for the moment, and a feeling of Dark magic rolled through the room as the Inferi came to life.

Harry swallowed the feeling of utter disgust that came from using magic that felt so fundamentally wrong, but smirked as the Basilisk turned its head in his direction as if knowing that Harry would defeat it.

“Crow,” he hissed in Parseltongue. The Basilisk only had a chance to dart its gaping jaws at Harry before the dead bird complied. The giant serpent shuddered at the sound, and then fell to the ground at last, mouth forever open and body unmoving.

Harry pointed his wand at the Inferi rooster and whispered, “Finite Incantatem,” as everyone looked around at each other in after-battle shock.

He didn't even think to duck, as Fawkes, taken over by instincts as a completely Light creature, dove to attack Harry, correctly thinking him behind the wave of Dark Magic that slowly seeped out of existence as the skeleton of the rooster crumbled once more.

Ch. 13 – Crime and Punishment

Having gone through detentions issued by almost every single teacher at Hogwarts, even the ones he hadn't really known like Vector the Arithmancy teacher and Crawford the Muggle Studies professor, Harry was well versed in each professor's style of intimidation.

For instance, Hagrid used his sheer size to intimidate those who he didn't like, and his like of dangerous or squirmy creatures for those he was mildly annoyed with.

Trelawney, obviously realizing her lack of ability to intimidate anyone, usually sent her victims to Snape, and was thus feared for that reason.

Filch lurked around dark corners, openly expressed his wish to hang students by their thumbs, and usually made troublemakers clean a part of the castle not cleaned in the last twenty years. Most students theorized that this was how Filch was able to keep his job without actually cleaning anything himself.

The Muggles Studies teacher always had a particularly sadistic streak when dealing with purebloods such as Malfoy or Nott that looked down on her for being 'inferior.' After making them clatter their way through a storage room, full of startling gizmos and erratically moving machines that chased wayward students, the detentionees were required to copy out of the good, old-fashioned dictionary.

None of these teachers came anywhere close to the Vaulted Four.

The Heads of Houses.

Snape, of course, intimidated his students within an inch of their lives, made them work with something oozy and usually nameless, and then sent them on their way in tears from his sharply pointed insults.

McGonagall had a second classroom few knew about, as most were not foolish enough to get detention with the Animagus. This second room was a veritable maze. Students were required to transfigure

looming aggressive desks and other monstrosities to escape the room and thereby end the detention. All while McGonagall and a couple of guests watched and made various derogatory remarks about spell technique or lack of magical ability. It was like getting two detentions in one, because McGonagall usually invited Snape.

Flitwick... well, no one was quite sure what his detentions were like. The cheery little professor was so well-liked by the student population that few crossed him. However, a couple erring Ravenclaws had earned detentions a few years back.

They never got a detention again.

Professor Sprout was considered the best of the four to get detentions with, because she never gave any, not that that was any consolation. She just looked at the misbehaving student with a look of disappointment that only a true Hufflepuff could give, leaving them feeling guilty for weeks on end. Of course, since this rarely worked on Slytherins (and Harry, Hermione, Ron, and the Weasley twins, when they were feeling particularly reckless), she sent them to McGonagall.

However, all of these detentions, and Harry had been to these and more, were nothing compared to being yelled at by the Order in the Headmaster's office.

“How could you be so STUPID?”

But at least he wasn't the only one.

Harry and Holly shared a glance as the encircling adults glared at them. They had been marched up to Dumbledore's office, amid protests from Harry that he had just saved their lives, Dark spell or no, and Holly's protests that they should know better than to leave a passageway open, with screams and yells issuing forth from it, and not expect her to investigate.

Glad that it was Holly being yelled at this moment rather than himself, Harry turned to glare at Fawkes, who, while looking apologetic, did not look regretful.

The phoenix, only acknowledging that Harry had messed with a spell as dark as creating Inferi, had attacked him, slashing his arm and face until Dumbledore had run over and half-heartedly restrained the bird. Harry assumed that he was half-hearted because he also had issues with Harry's choice of spell.

So Fawkes, after calming down, had twittered at Harry scoldingly and healed his wounds, except for a long scratch on Harry's arm. The phoenix had undoubtedly left that as a reminder to leave Dark spells alone.

Not that Harry had any intention of listening, as he had promptly used a barely legal spell to heal his arm and spite Fawkes.

The phoenix was not amused.

As they all went back through the tunnel, Snape demanding that Harry leave the Chamber open so he could come back and gather potion ingredients, the Order had begun to jump down Harry's throat once more, criticizing his spell use and crude method of getting Fawkes to join them. They had all stopped, though, upon turning a corner and seeing Holly stand there with wide eyes, her arms full of healing supplies and her wand.

"It's not like I went down there with my eyes shut, bouncing off of walls and having forgotten my wand!" Holly protested the accusation of stupidity. "For all I knew, all of you were dying and couldn't call for help!"

"Idiot child," Snape snapped. "As if we would be unable to call for help, and in doing so would be greatly helped with the presence of a teenager."

"Well, MAYBE," Holly shouted back, "if someone had TOLD Rose or me that everyone was GOING TO DISAPPEAR, Rose and I wouldn't have been so frantic looking for everyone!"

There was silence as everyone digested the fact that they had failed to tell anyone else, besides Madam Pomfrey, where they were going.

Harry chuckled. "That's a good point."

He immediately regretted it as the glares refocused on him.

"And YOU, Collins!" Lily now started back on Harry, at which Holly looked relieved. "What were you THINKING? Creating an Inperi? Not only is it illegal, which I'm sure you have no concern over, but magic that Dark begins to twist your soul! That ritual is such an incredibly stupid, foolish thing to do, and..." Lily paused as she noticed Harry watching her with a strange expression on his face. "What?"

"Hmm?" Harry responded. This was certainly a memory to keep track of. His mum was yelling at him for the first time, and it was for creating an Inperi rooster... this could only happen to him.

"What? Oh, please continue. You were yelling at me for killing the Basilisk. I believe insulting Professor Dumbledore to bring Fawkes down and distract the serpent was next on your list." He inwardly grinned as he watched Lily pause uncomfortably as the situation was put like that. "No, really. Please do."

Lily merely crossed her arms and glared at him. Harry glared back, one eyebrow raised. But he gradually felt his confidence slipping as Lily continued to glare steadily.

The other noise in the room fell and an awkward silence warped the room as the two pairs of green eyes continued to glare at each other.

"You think I'm joking, Collins?" Lily asked, her voice harsh and unforgiving. "You continue using Dark Arts like creating Inperi and the Cruciatus Curse, and I will personally turn you in to the Ministry."

Harry flinched at the mention of the Cruciatus, especially at seeing Sirius stand right next to Lily. "Bellatrix Lestrange deserved the Curse put on her, and I deserved to cast it. When something reaches that point, Ministry laws matter very little."

Lily didn't waver. "Nobody deserves that Curse."

Harry thought over that statement. Perhaps it would be true in different circumstances, but certainly not now. "Not even Voldemort?"

She paused, and Harry felt the oddest sensation that he had crossed a line he hadn't even known existed.

"Not even Voldemort," she said as if trying the words in her mouth. "He deserves so much worse."

"And I second that," Harry said softly. "But who will defeat him if we're all afraid to use his tools?"

Harry snapped his mouth shut with an audible click, biting his tongue in the process. His mouth was far too loose today... next thing he knew, he would be going around shaking hands and introducing himself as Harry James Potter.

"Defeat?" Albus mumbled to himself quietly, and only Harry and Remus could hear. "Who...defeat... Mr. Collins," he said at a normal volume, and Harry turned his neck slowly to face him as if hoping beyond hope that Dumbledore didn't actually say anything. "What day did you arrive here, again?"

Harry buried his face in his hands. "I can't remember?" He asked hopefully. Even without uncovering his eyes, Harry could feel Dumbledore's admonishing look and the stares of the surrounding people, who must have been wondering why Harry was trying to hide behind Holly. "The first of August," he said with an air like the end of the world was coming.

"That's what I thought." Albus straightened his spectacles with an air of self-satisfaction in return. Harry glared as Minerva and Severus shared evil looks and smirks. "And you said your birthday was just a couple days before, correct?" Albus continued.

Harry mentally sighed with relief. At least Dumbledore wasn't trying to figure out his real identity. He was just... "Damn it all to hell."

“What was that?” Holly asked sweetly, and Harry glared. She knew exactly what he had said, and most likely knew that he had taken great effort to edit out the rest of it.

“Yes, Headmaster. Thirtieth of July, that's me,” Harry answered with false cheer, ignoring the look and choked cough from Minerva that sounded very violent. “You might want to get that cough looked at, Professor.”

He paused as Fawkes chirped, in his mind, sadistically at the scene. “What was that, Fawkes? A Death Eater attack, you said? Well, we all had better go off and get that taken care of.”

Harry stood and contemplated the benefits of bolting. Sirius and James, obviously knowing what he had in mind, marching towards the door with military precision and blocked it. Harry then half-heartedly eyed the window, but Moody stood in front of it, hitting his wand against his palm as he glared around the room.

“Sit,” Dumbledore commanded.

Harry sat.

“Anything you'd like to share, Mr. Collins?”

“That I have a deep and profound desire to make several crude hand gestures at this moment, but am only refraining because Holly is here?”

“Don't stop on my account,” Holly commented. “This is getting good.”

Harry rolled his eyes, and contemplated his options. He really didn't want to say anything out loud where everyone could hear... But Dumbledore was counting on that, wasn't he? Harry narrowed his eyes.

Of course. Dumbledore was just putting him in the uncomfortable position of pleading the fifth before the Order.

Time to burst his bubble, then.

“I'm the only one who can kill Voldemort.”

Everyone froze as Harry's clear statement rang through the office. Harry grinned ecstatically and Dumbledore's eyes bulged momentarily before his face returned to the usual jovial calm. Snape and McGonagall didn't react, as they had all known. But there ended the sea of calm.

“Can you repeat that?” Peter asked hesitantly, and Harry sneered.

“Simple English, Pettigrew. I'm the only one who can kill Voldemort.”

“We're screwed.” James said and turned to Lily. “What do you think about Canada?”

“Funny.” Harry rolled his eyes at James's statement. “Very funny.”

“It could be worse--he could have suggested we all become Death Eaters and get it over with,” Peter commented without thinking, and Sirius barked with laughter.

Harry paled with rage at that statement, and his hand unconsciously moved towards the scar at the crook of his elbow. The scar caused by Wormtail's ministrations during Voldemort's rebirth.

Minerva must have seen the expression of his face. “That remark was uncalled for, Mr. Pettigrew,” she snapped. “Need I remind you that not everyone appreciates such caustic comments?”

Pettigrew obviously thought she was talking about Holly or Lily, and subsided.

“But how can you possibly be the only one who can defeat Voldemort?” Remus asked. “You're only seventeen, and barely that.”

“Don't ask me,” Harry grumbled. “It's...” Harry surreptitiously glanced at Dumbledore, who shook his head. Harry interpreted that to mean to not say the source of the prophecy. “... what one of the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries said. Somehow he interpreted a time line of the future and said that I had to defeat Voldemort so all these other time lines wouldn't happen.”

Harry didn't even blink as he made up the lie, and Dumbledore took careful note of that.

Nothing would have happened if Collins had revealed Sybil as the source of the prophecy, but he had wanted to see how developed Collins' lying abilities were. Apparently, the teen could be a dangerous adversary if so inclined.

“What happened in these time lines?” Lily asked, never one for all the fanciful ideas of time.

“Voldemort won, endless chaos and destruction, Stubby Boardman becoming Minister of Magic. All sorts of horrible things.”

“Speaking of all sorts of horrible things,” Lily said, glancing at the clock, “it's time to run this little adventure down. It's one o'clock in the morning. Holly, bed.”

Harry took this moment to send a look at McGonagall which plainly said “Reason One.”

Holly indignantly turned red at being singled out. “But--”

“No buts,” James said. “Listen to your mother.”

“And you?” Lily raised one eyebrow. “Don't you have work tomorrow?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“No buts,” the Prewitt brothers chimed. “Listen to your wife.”

“And you two can go home,” Lily finished crossing her arms but grinning.

“Aye aye,” they chanted, and vanished in a puff of smoke that filled the entire room.

Coughing, Harry glared at the spot the brothers just stood at. “Oh, come on, like none of us saw them use the Floo.”

“That's Fabian and Gideon for you,” Holly responded before walking out of the office.

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Harry knelt down at the spot where Ginny's slowly weakening body had lain in his universe. It was here where he had first realized his own mortality, and known with full realization that death was coming.

It was here where Tom Riddle had revealed himself to be bitter and evil, so much so that his seventeen-year-old self was corrupted beyond saving. Where he had slowly drained tried to drain the life out of one of Harry's closest friends.

Harry's eyes shifted to the spot where he had killed the Basilisk, desperately shoving the sword of Gryffindor into the serpent's mouth, only to be pierced by its own poisonous fangs. Reality dissolved in front of him until he was lost in the memory.

He had felt so unprepared for death, with Riddle cackling over him. So many things left to do...

“Potter!”

Harry snapped out of it, called back to reality after hearing his real name.

“A little assistance is required,” Snape snapped, trying to lift the Basilisk's head to skin the area against the stone floor. “I assumed

that's why you were down here, but if you want to continue to stare into space..."

Harry watched as Snape once more tried to tug the head off the ground, knowing magic would do no good.

He threw his head back and laughed, the ironic sound echoing off the stone walls. "Wizards," Harry chuckled. "I swear, if Muggles hadn't invented the wheel and fire..."

"Something you would like to share?" The Potions Master bit out.

"Simple machines, Professor," Harry said. When he didn't elicit a response, he continued. "Lever, pulley...any of this sounding familiar?"

Snape growled as Harry refused to assist anymore, and grumpily Conjured a wooden stand that he slid under the Basilisk's head before lengthening the stand's legs. "It wouldn't kill you to help."

"Probably not," Harry agreed, "but it's much more fun to reminisce. Besides, your ingredients, your job."

"I don't remember you taking that attitude while drinking my Dreamless Sleep Potion--"

--Which doesn't require any Basilisk ingredients."

Snape glared at the interruption. "If you would prefer to spend your time searching for Desgnian Slime Beetles..."

Harry gave up, his memories once more at the back of his mind. He fingered the slip of crumbly parchment in his pocket. 'Hope is gone. Tell JIESS good-bye for me...' he thought wonderingly, deciding to save the mystery for another time.

"Fine, fine," he said, turning to the Basilisk after looking once more at that memorable spot on the ground. "What do you need me to do?"

Snape smirked, and handed Harry along knife. "Start skinning."

Harry wrinkled his nose in distaste before taking the offered knife. Snake skin was horrid to collect, as Harry had found out in numerous detentions. Basilisk skin was sure to be worse.

However, at least this world's Snape didn't know to make sure Harry wasn't cheating by using wandless magic, which, for reasons unknown (or not willingly divulged by Dumbledore), Basilisk skin was powerless against wandless or artifact-less magic.

So Harry started humming as he quickly sliced the skin into eight by four foot chunks, pausing as he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Pretending to once more focus on his work, Harry glanced at the entranceway, nodding to himself in annoyed satisfaction as he saw people duck behind one of the statues of a snake.

All four Marauders, no doubt planning something horrendous. Waiting until Peter once more poked his head from behind the statue to make sure neither Harry nor Snape had noticed them, Harry threw the knife artfully behind his shoulder, hitting the stone just a scant inch to the right of Pettigrew's face.

Harry grinned in satisfaction as Pettigrew, his eyes wide and bulging, ducked behind the statue and hastily had a whispered conference with his companions, the knife still quivering from the force.

"Oops," Harry drawled dryly mocking. "The knife slipped. I guess I need to work on my aim."

Harry's sense of satisfaction grew as the Marauders noiselessly left immediately after that, their mischievous task incomplete. He Summoned his knife, and got a back to work, humming once more.

(OoO)

DEVASTATION ACROSS THE COUNTRY!

'The Dark Mark has been seen over hundreds of houses this past year alone,' reports Sandra Bolski, special correspondent of the Daily Prophet. 'The government has yet to put a stop to the mayhem of this 25-year threat to Wizarding Society. The latest crime of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was a widespread fire across North Braxton, a Muggle town of northern England. Over eleven thousand Muggles were pronounced dead, with 5 Ministry Obliviation Teams covering the field. The story is a gas explosion at a local chemical, some form of Muggle potion, factory. However, this cover up of thousands of deaths does not blind the Wizarding public, who are eager to know why the government will not protect the people, magical and Muggle alike, from You-Know-Who's threat.

Page 13, the list of Muggle fatalities

Page 7, other cover-ups of the Ministry

Page 3, voters speak against Crouch's inaction'

Harry grimaced at the news. Every article he had found so far was exactly the same. The Ministry was too busy shielding the Wizarding World from the eyes of the Muggles to concentrate on actual defenses. People like this Sandra Bolski, while infinitely better than Rita Skeeter, were far too content just blaming the Ministry.

He threw down the old newspaper in disgust. The government was not supposed to be a shield, just a structure. He couldn't believe the

laziness of people, who were not willing to get involved. It was the same way in his old world, and he was very annoyed with it.

Shoving his irritation away, he eyed the stacks of newspaper he had rooted through for information. There were dozens of attacks every year. This Voldemort was far more daring, but perhaps that was because he had not met a threat more than Dumbledore. There were thousands of eyewitness accounts of losing family that Harry had found his eyes prickling uncomfortably throughout the last hour.

Fortunately, however, Voldemort had yet to become a world-wide problem. The Dark wizard so far just concentrating on Great Britain, if that could be seen as a good thing.

Sighing at the sheer weight of the problem, Harry began to put the newspapers back into their slots. Merlin forbid Madam Pince coming in to see newspaper helter-skelter across the surface of the table.

Holding the last few newspapers in his hand, Harry froze when he heard a faint whisper behind him.

Ears straining to hear, Harry continued to put up the newspapers, not alerting whoever was making that sound. All he heard was a faint sound, barely audible, until he heard a giggle.

He gave up all pretense of ignoring the sound, and whirled around to find no one there. Pulling out his wand, Harry stepped into the shadows of a nearby bookcase.

'No one was in here when I came in,' he thought to himself, 'and I didn't hear or see anyone since then . . .'

The giggle sounded again, nearly at his elbow.

But no one was there.

'Okay, that didn't sound like Myrtle,' Harry thought, going through all the possibilities. 'It's not Peeves, or any of the other ghosts. Unless someone put an Invisibility Charm on themselves to heckle me . . .'

Harry mentally smirked. As much as it hurt to think in this line, all the Marauders were here. He was stupid not to expect either retaliation for a few days ago or a prank to test him.

Of course, he would have thought that the warning with the knife would have taught them that it was very, very hard to sneak up on him.

'And,' Harry thought, 'don't these people ever have to go to work?'

Casting an Invisibility Charm on himself, Harry cast a silent Seeking spell, which would allow him to see all the magical signatures in the general vicinity. At first, he didn't see anyone, but he turned to look at the door and saw two shapes huddled behind Madam Pince's desk.

One seemed very familiar, similar to Harry's own, but older and less Dark, less haunted. 'Most likely James'.

The other one wasn't hard to figure out after that. A spectral shape of a Grim flowed in and out of the second's signature. Sirius.

Feeling particularly snarky after being watched while he was reading newspapers, Harry decided to frighten the pranksters a little bit. 'They would have to try harder than that...'

"Who could that be?" Harry wondered out loud, his voice taking on the slippery tone Snape always used in class.

"There was no one here but me, at least not anymore," Harry said ponderingly, becoming visible again. "So could this prank be by the Marauders four?"

He paused as the two crouching forms shifted uneasily.

"No, the giggles and steps are too far-between and few," James and Sirius relaxed, thinking they wouldn't be caught. "So could it be the Marauders two?"

With that last improvised verse, Harry quickly flicked his wand in their direction, forcing the two to stand.

They did so, shifting guiltily, looking as they no doubt had during their school days.

"Really," Harry said, smirking slightly. "Was this amateurish act necessary?"

James prodded Sirius forward. Sirius turned to glare at his friend, but stepped forward hesitantly anyway.

"Well, you see, Collins," Sirius began, and Harry looked at him forbiddingly. The dog Animagus gulped and started again. "It's been a short-standing tradition for newcomers to the castle to be pranked by the Marauders, and, well--"

"This is the best you could come up with?" Harry interrupted, making the two freeze and look at him oddly. "I heard a lot about the Marauders from my world." Harry heaved a fake sigh of disappointment. "I guess I just expected you to have the same quality of pranks. I guess not."

"Now see here, Collins," James, who had burst into the conversation, stopped when he saw Collins looking at him with amusement, and couldn't stop a grin of his own. "That was low."

"Yes, yes it was," Harry agreed. "But I still think you need to lay off the Muggle horror movies."

"You got that from a Muggle movie?" Sirius demanded of James, looking incredulously at him. "Honestly, Prongs, no wonder it didn't work."

Harry watched Sirius silently as James, his father, tried to defend his actions. This one was completely different from the Sirius Harry had known. The one of this universe was more carefree, and didn't have the haunted look. He also didn't seem to have the work-to-the-bone complex that the Harry's Sirius had when recreating 12 Grimmauld Place and talking about Voldemort. 'Perhaps the difference will make not slipping up easier.' Harry hoped, and went back to watching the two 38-year-olds bicker like second years.

"Well, I'm going to leave you two to think of better pranks," Harry said, walking out of the library. "And I'd watch out when you open the door."

The last bit was said with such a mischievous look that the Marauders were very hesitant to leave the library.

(OoO)

Lily Potter was walking determinedly to the Hogwarts Library, a scowl etched onto her face.

"I'm going to murder him!" She grumbled under her breath. "It's one thing to terrorize the students every year, but to burn my class plans! Especially after just creating new ones! We should have let that Basilisk at him!"

The banishment of Peeves was the only issue she and Filch agreed upon, but it was enough middle ground for them to swap several of Peeves' horror stories when they met in the hallways. 'This, however,' she thought, 'is the final straw.'

She wrenched open the Library door, still muttering about poltergeists and horrible demises. She stopped upon seeing her husband and Sirius wielding a seven foot stick with a hook on one end.

"What are you two trying to do?" She demanded impatiently, in no mood for the usual Marauder shenanigans.

It was James who was prodded forward this time.

"Well, Sirius and I were testing Collins, seeing how far we could prank him. He caught on quickly, and told us to work on it."

Here a glint of determination crossed both James' and Sirius' faces, almost causing Lily to wince at what Chris Collins had gotten himself into. "Then he warned us about opening the door. He obviously did something to it."

Lily looked again at the hook the two had obviously been trying to use to open the door. Then she glanced at the door. She had an inherent ability to sense traces of charms ever since James had turned her hair blue in third year, but saw nothing unusual on the door.

Inwardly cheering for Collins' simple yet effective trick, she stalked to the door and yanked it.

James and Sirius were running forward as if to stop her, but paused when nothing happened.

Looks of frustration appeared on the two Marauders faces, as Lily broke down and started laughing, pointing her finger at the two.

"Collins got you!" She breathed, her voice filled with mirth. "He pranked without doing anything! I daresay you might have met your match!"

Looking insulted, Sirius and James puffed themselves up. "We certainly have not! No one can beat the Marauders!" They ran for the Charms section of the Library, already having hasty conferences about what to do to their new rival.

'It seems that they are starting to accept Collins,' Lily thought, rolling her eyes, and ignoring them, went to work on her lesson plans, starting up her thoughts over the death of Peeves.

None of the three noticed Holly, hidden under her father's Invisibility Cloak, enter and pick up a video camera hidden among the newspapers.

Holly hustled down the corridors of Hogwarts, opened the passage behind the clock portrait, and burst into her room.

She knew that Chris Collins had been in the library, comparing the news of this world to his own, and Holly thought that this was one of the best opportunities to find out those comparisons as well.

She pressed play, hunched over the camera on her bed, and watched as the screen turned a fuzzy blue, then focused on Collins.

She watched as he walked up to the section of yearbooks in the library, and focused the screen to get a better view of the titles. The first one was one from six years ago, his first year.

He flipped within the pages, pausing here and there, but didn't say anything. Frustrated, Holly pointed her wand at the screen and uttered, "Decaroe" to make the book transparent, but as soon as the spell activated, he put the book back, a bittersweet look on his face.

"Nice to know it was a peaceful year," Collins muttered, making Holly wonder what he meant. 'Nothing specific happened at the school,' she thought to herself, 'but Voldemort was still attacking Britain. That year was far from peaceful.'

She watched as he began skimming the newspapers, noting various comments and facial expressions. She had seen her dad and Sirius creep into the library when Collins was too absorbed in an article, and laughed quietly as they were efficiently captured.

Collins left and she paid special attention to the conversation that followed.

"Well, did he pass the test?" her dad asked, looking unsure.

"He didn't blow up like Snape would, so he has some sense of humor. He also challenged us, showing that he is a Gryffindor," Sirius answered, looking more serious than usual. "So he passed the Marauder test. But as for being trusted, I don't know. He's kind of creepy."

"Exactly," her dad agreed. "Did you see how he knew exactly where we were, and how many of us were pranking him? Not to mention not even stopping when he heard the giggles-- even Moody's not that good!"

"He's creepy, yeah, and Moony said not to trust him. I mean, he had all those traces of Dark Magic, using the Curse on my," she saw Sirius grimace here, "cousin. I agree that he shouldn't be trusted around Rose or Holly, but really, that's no reason not to prank him."

"Too true, Padfoot. Wish we knew more about him though."

"Well, we can just incorporate that into whatever prank we'll get him with next. Now, however, we need to figure out what he did to the door."

"Did you see him cast anything? I didn't." Her dad said, looking at the door nervously.

"Nope. But I still think he did something to it. Maybe if we fashion a hook out of this . . ."

Holly turned off the camera and sighed. That endeavor wasn't especially helpful, but she knew some more details. If Collins used the Cruciatus Curse on Sirius' cousin from another universe, that meant Narcissa Malfoy, Andromeda Tonks, or Bellatrix Lestrangle.

She automatically disregarded Tonks' mum. She was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and Collins was too comfortable around Tonks to have cursed her mother. That left Malfoy and Lestrangle, both likely candidates. But from various snooping, Holly knew that Malfoy was rarely involved in Death Eater things, mostly leeching money off her husband and helping present the Malfoy name with a presentable, attractive face. Lestrangle, on the other hand, was very likely. She was a full-fledged Death Eater, if her past eavesdropping was any indication, and was crazy to boot.

Mind made up that Bellatrix Lestrangle was the one who had ticked off Collins, she wrote down facts gathered from the tape into her journal, charming it so no one could read it without her password and magical signature. She had found the spell in the Restricted Section, and it was of questionable legality. The person attempting to read the journal would suffer minor to medium curses, depending on their intentions and determination. Holly decided to use the spell anyway. She wasn't supposed to know Order information, but that didn't mean she was going to be careless with it.

Making sure the journal was locked and sealed. She erased the tape, knowing that no one could view what she just had. Standing and

sliding the camera into a secret compartment in the wall, she went off to investigate the seventh floor, determined to know more about Collin's Room of Requirement.

(OoO)

“Damn it,” Harry said, a fork in his left hand as he scribbled furiously on parchment with his right.

He had spent the entire morning helping Snape gather potion ingredients, and the rest of the afternoon finishing his research of this world's past. After trapping the two Marauders in the Library, Harry had traveled the dusty path to Hogwarts' archives, usually only frequented by lost first years and ghosts. There he had been searching the records for any student who had vanished from Hogwarts in the fifties or sixties, but had found no one.

It was about that time that Peeves had shown up, hollering bloody murder about Harry telling all his secrets. Harry, in no mood to deal with the more irritating than usual specter, had pointed his wand at the poltergeist and told him point-blank to go annoy someone else or suffer the consequences.

However, barely an hour after Peeves had swooped away in fear and disgust, Holly and Rose had shown up, fussing and scolding at Harry for not eating properly, and they had promptly pushed, threatened, and yelled Harry into the Great Hall, where he was now eating and working on lesson plans.

So far he had managed to avoid any threats, lectures, or Dumbledorian discussions, but Harry didn't think his luck would hold forever.

“That plan won't work for fourth years,” he muttered to himself. “Unless I can recruit those books always running around, there'd be no way to catch them off guard, especially if they saw me. And Glamours don't work very well...”

Not even noticing as he did so, Harry pushed his plate of food away and dragged the parchment closer, not seeing the Potter family, who was sitting somewhat close by, start at the noise.

Lily frowned as she watched Collins mutter to himself and completely forget about eating. "That can't be healthy," she pointed out to her husband, and glared as he rolled his eyes in response. "I'm serious, James. Have you ever seen Collins eat?"

James waved his fork around in the air nonchalantly. "So he goes and eats in the kitchens," he answered. "What's your point?"

Lily's frown deepened and she kicked James in the shin.

"OW!" James exclaimed, and then quieted at a look. "Ow! Damn, Lily, you have pointy shoes!" He glanced at Collins again. "Okay, Lily. Yes, he doesn't eat, that you know of. He obviously does eat, or he would have collapsed already, especially with using so much magic."

They both grimaced at the remembrance of Collins created an Inferi, but Lily continued. "I still don't think he is. He was rail thin after the Death Eaters got through with him in his world, and he still doesn't look any better. Don't they just keep prisoners alive on nutrition charms?"

Holly, who had been listening to her parents' discussion with growing suspicion, looked askance at Collins, and made her decision. She had only seen him eat once, and considering she was Hogwarts' residential spy, besides Snape, of course, that wasn't a good thing. Picking up her plate, she walked over to Collins' table, where he was still muttering over the parchment.

"What? No—Holly, get back here!" Lily and James hissed, but it was too late.

"Hello, Collins," Holly proclaimed as she sat down on a seat across from Harry.

“Holly,” Harry nodded in return, most of his attention focused on his scribbles.

“I think you're a wuss,” she said nonchalantly, and mentally nodded in satisfaction as Harry started and looked in surprise.

“Um...thanks?” Harry responded dryly, having no idea what Holly was up to.

“To give you a chance at protecting your honor,” Holly continued loudly, and everyone looked up in curiosity, “I will now challenge you to a pie-eating contest.”

Harry's stomach lurched at the thought, but he just rolled his eyes. “I'm busy, Holly. Perhaps I'll save my honor another time.”

'He's good,' Holly thought silently, marveling at his acting abilities. 'Too bad he has to act mature in order to have any chance of joining the Order and fighting Voldemort, since he's just seventeen years old.'

She pointed her wand at the parchment, and magically rolled it up, sticking it in between the pages of her book. “Well, now you're not.”

Harry glared at her in annoyance, but Holly put on her pathetic I'm-bored-play-with-me face that she had perfected over the years, and he crumbled like Ron's bravado in front of Aragog.

“Fine,” he conceded, mentally cursing at what he had gotten himself into. He knew perfectly well that Holly was conning him with that face for reasons as known, but Harry didn't have it in him to say no to his unknowingly sister. “What is it that you want?”

“It's a challenge that fourth years have to face to graduate from that year. I'm guessing that by your facial expression, you didn't have to?” Holly explained, lying through her teeth.

“No, I can't say I've ever been challenged to a pie-eating contest,” Harry said slowly, doubtfully. “And I'm older than a fourth year, so I'm perfectly happy with that tradition passing me by.”

“Too bad.”

And as if by magic, 'Fancy that,' Harry thought, two appeared.

“This is really immature,” Harry said sternly, trying to pull away as his stomach protested from close proximity to food.

“So is locking my dad and Sirius in the Library,” Holly retorted.

“I didn't lock it, and they should have known to check for spells, grown primates that they appear to be,” Harry grumbled without any real heat. Far be it for him to deny his sister anything, and she seemed to put some stock in this strange tradition. From McGonagall's pinched and glaring smile, she too remembered that he would hardly refuse Holly for reasons that she and Snape alone knew.

'She really needs to get over this,' Harry thought ruefully. 'It's not like I'm her evil, Dark, demented child.'

Shivering and scolding himself for such a thought, which was sufficient enough to make anyone want to go Dark, he focused back on Holly, who had shoved a fork into his hand. “Is this really necessary?”

“Why?” Holly asked mockingly. “Are you afraid of something?”

She stepped backwards from the penetrating look he sent. It communicated quite fiercely that if Collins was going to be afraid of anything, it certainly wouldn't be anything so childish as this.

“Not at all,” Harry said pleasantly. “So how does this work?”

Holly plopped herself down in the seat. “The one who finishes the pie first wins,” she declared confidently.

“Wins what?” Harry narrowed his eyes.

“That's for the winner to decide,” she answered. “Ready?...Go!”

She started eating at a slightly faster pace than she usually did, most of her attention focused on Harry. To her horror, he was going faster than herself, apparently not feeling any side-effects at all from eating.

A feeling of amused dread filled as she realized that there was no way possible for her to win.

Until she saw pain begin to fill her companion's eyes and he slowed down dramatically, not noticing as Holly did so herself as well.

Harry recoiled as his stomach violently protested the first food it had had in over a month. Tightening his jaw, he dropped his fork and wrapped an arm around his stomach, feeling like his insides were twisting as if they had been transfigured into snakes.

His other hand clenched the table, trembling under the pressure his muscles were exerting. Knowing he was unable to defend himself, Harry's Animagus side came out, the fingernails of the hand on the table lengthening raggedly, his eyes flashing yellow and his senses sharpened.

The pain in his stomach over-riding his constant hiding of pain from others, Harry gave up any semblance of being fine and ran for the double doors that lead to the Entrance Hall.

He heard someone running after him, and, not realizing it could be Holly, the werewolf part of his mind rose once more and he snarled warningly, his teeth elongating to underline the threat.

But the momentary slip in concentration made him fall to his knees and lost the battle of controlling his stomach. Harry heaved and tasted familiar coppery blood on his lips, closing his eyes as his stomach continued to twist and pull.

Feeling more than hearing people come stand around him, Harry whispered, "Stay away!"

Some of them apparently heard him, and no one responded.

"No, Collins. You need to go see Ma--"

But he wasn't listening. Caught up in recent memories of fear and pain, Harry heard the voice of the rat Animagus, though not what it was saying, and instinctively considered it a threat.

A gust of uncontrollable magic swirled around Harry and headed towards Pettigrew, slamming him against the stone wall.

"Stay away," he whispered again, and jerked as his stomach twisted again.

Holly watched the scene with wide eyes. What had she done? She hadn't thought about what she was doing at all—and now look what was happening. Holly had seen the wild look in Collins' eyes as Peter had spoken, and wondered if the resulting magical attack was because Peter was the first to speak, or because it was Peter himself.

Luckily, though, Peter had suffered no ill effects from slamming into the wall, besides a new wariness when he approached the group again. "Should someone get Dumbledore? Or Poppy?"

He got no answer, as Harry arched his back and screamed, his arms still clenched around his stomach.

The curtains on the Great Hall windows twisted and warped, making daylight rapidly enter and leave as if in sympathy with Harry's plight.

They all winced at the yells of pain, but were still clueless. None of them had studied medicine, and none of them had ever heard of anything like this happening.

James turned as he heard someone sniffing behind, and saw Holly watching Collins, tears pouring down her face. "What did I do?" She whispered.

James walked over to his two children and pushed them out of the Great Hall, whispering in Holly's ear as they went, making sure neither she nor Rose looked back.

Lily bit her lip as the teenager continued to cry out in pain. There was nothing she could do to help him. Only Madam Pomfrey could.

"Stupefy."

(OoO)

Lucius Malfoy tapped his quill against the old oaken wood of his desk. His Master had given him a task he loathed to do, yet he could hardly decline.

Bellatrix Black had informed the Dark Lord of Chris Collins, and her suspicions that he would jump at the chance to join the Death Eaters. The Dark Lord had not been fond of the idea until Bellatrix had confessed to looting through the teen's mind, reading nothing but a true contempt for Muggle-lovers and Mudbloods.

Now he, Lucius, had been given the task of inviting the whelp. Pushing aside his contempt for the Canadian pureblood, he began to write.

'Mr. Chris Collins,

Congratulations on maintaining high taste and wizarding dignity among current times, where the common and misguided rule. As such, you have been invited to meet with forces attempting to correct this fallacy under the rule of our Lord, Lord Voldemort. If you should choose to accept this high honor...

(OoO)

Chapter 14: Let the Games Begin!

((OOOOOOOOOO))

Harry's eyes darted around the platform. He quickly checked for any visible traps or blocks that would hinder his mobility.

'Who am I kidding?' He asked himself. 'This is Moody... why on Earth would he make something that easy to detect?'

The devil Harry spoke of was directly across from him, grinning coldly in a way that made Harry feel very, very nervous. Though it had been Moody's idea, Harry was mentally beating himself up for agreeing to a duel, moderately friendly or no.

Because, as everyone had seen fit to tell him, there was no way a 'backwards, Dark teenager' like Harry could ever beat an Auror like Moody.

They had all assured him of this fact for the last couple days, ever since Harry and Lupin had gotten out of the Hospital Wing. It seemed, much to Harry's sadness, that relations between himself and several of the others had gone from bad to worse.

((OOOOOOOOOO))

“Pptr.”

Mild irritation flashed across Harry's mind as noise fought its way through the soft, white cocoon he was currently swaying in. He didn't feel like he would ever want to leave, regardless of the increasingly insistent sounds.

“Pottr. Potter!”

He frowned as the voice got louder, breaking his tranquility.

“Potter!”

“Damn it!” Harry said softly, burrowing deeper into the pillow and blanket he found himself on top of. “If I wanted to bloody answer, I would have already!”

“Get up, Potter. I know you're awake.”

Harry finally opened his eyes, though only enough to allow the briefest of amount of visibility.

“Instant. Death,” Harry croaked as he recognized the black blob in front of him as Snape. “Avada Kedavra, swift wings, the whole shebang.”

Snape smirked, and Harry blinked as the surrounding area came into focus. White walls, soft beds, the lingering smell of potions...

“Collins is awake, Poppy!” Snape shouted, and the smirk deepened as Harry's eyes widened in fear. He tried to sit up, with silently admitted defeat as the world spun and his stomach twisted in protest.

“What? No, come on, Snape. I just escaped from here yesterday. Don't call Madam Pomfrey in here!”

Harry shut his eyes in defeat as he heard the mediwitch come out of her office. “I wasn't joking. Swift wings, or, if I'm lucky, very slow, painful wings.”

“Enough with the death threats, Mr. Collins,” Poppy commanded as she walked over to his bed.

“Fine, but I will find a way to escape. Again.”

“Take me with you!” A voice groaned from another bed. “You can't leave a fellow sufferer behind!”

“Lupin?” Harry asked, momentarily frightened that Lupin had heard his real name before remembering that if the werewolf had been in hearing distance Snape couldn't have said it, and got an affirmative mutter. “And what crime have you committed to get stuck in here?”

“She has no proof about the Technicolor mice, and I defy her to prove it in court!”

Harry chuckled, still not moving from the bed. “Fair enough. I'll take you with me when I escape.”

Madam Pomfrey glared at her two plotting charges. “If you two children would stop complaining, then maybe I could get you out of here sooner.”

Harry rolled his eyes, as Remus responded, “Poppy, if we didn't complain, you would think that there were even more things wrong with us, and we'd be stuck here forever.”

The Mediwitch was not amused.

“You two,” she began in a deadly tone, and Harry and Lupin exchanged looks of trepidation, “are well on your way to being my most uncooperative charges. This is not cause for celebration or retort,” she quickly snapped as Harry opened his mouth, and he reluctantly closed it. “It means that you two will behave, or,” she plucked a syringe of her desk, “you will be sedated. Any questions?”

She smiled blissfully at the silence. “I thought not.”

She looked at Severus, who was no doubt holding back a few comments of his own. “You are not excluded from that, Professor. Now, I'm sure you two are wondering why you're here, but quite frankly, so am I. Mr. Collins, at first it seemed that the Death Eaters that captured you in your dimension put some sort of time-delay curse on you, making you unable to eat without extreme pain.”

“That is beyond most of their talents, so I'm sensing a 'but'.”

Madam Pomfrey picked up the needle, and Harry fell silent, still keeping a wary eye on Madam Pomfrey's weapon of choice. “But, Remus here began to suffer from the same side-effects, having not

eaten for a couple days as well. I'm sure I don't need to lecture the two of you on that."

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey," they chorused, trying to make themselves appear innocent.

"The only things that could have been the cause of your maladies were the fact that a Potter was the one to force both of you into eating, or that genetically mutated plant that only affected werewolves. Since it seems unlikely that anyone cursed both of you, however tempting, it now seems that that plant has unexpected properties."

"Erm... unexpected properties?" Lupin asked hesitantly.

"Yes. As I'm sure you already discovered, it makes your stomach have a violent reaction to any food, and inability to move without dizziness and nausea. Basically, it's the perfect incapacitation--Collins! Get back in that bed this instant!"

Harry, while listening and memorizing everything that Madam Pomfrey was saying, slowly tried to sit up once more. Achieving that with only minimal room-spinning, he only had time to get one foot on the floor before he was caught.

"Well," Harry said as Madam Pomfrey glared at him, and Lupin took this opportunity to slowly sit up as well, also picking up his wand and Banishing the syringe to an unknown location, "if the damned plant had unexpected properties, then maybe the cure is the unexpected idea of moving around."

When Madam Pomfrey humphed in irritation and disbelief, Harry couldn't help adding, "Maybe white walls are prolonging the effects."

At the murderous look directed his way, Harry decided that it was high time he started cooperating, and reluctantly got back on the bed.

"Oh, good, you can be taught," Madam Pomfrey quipped, before disappearing back into her office, beckoning Severus to come with

her and muttering about the side-effects of various potion ingredients. Harry winced at the loud slam of the door.

“How long before she checks up on us?” Harry asked Remus out of the side of his mouth.

“I have no doubt she's watching us right now, so probably not for a while. I'm just not sure how she's managing it,” the werewolf answered without moving his lips.

Harry lay there and thought about this for a second. Even if anyone heard him speak in Parseltongue, they wouldn't be able to figure out the password. “How serious were you about breaking out?”

Remus grimaced, glaring at the white walls. “Collins, I hate hospitals more than anything else in this world. If you can get us out of here, I'll build you an altar.”

“You're not setting a very good example, are you?” Harry asked with a slight smirk. “Aren't you supposed to say that this establishment is here for our own health, et cetera, et cetera, and escaping is not only immature but dangerous?”

“You wouldn't listen anyway, so what would be the point?”

Harry opened his mouth to respond to that, but fell silent as the Hospital Wing door opened, then shut, with nobody coming through. Madam Pomfrey's door stayed sealed shut, and hopefully neither inhabitant had noticed the movement.

“Moony,” hissed a voice, and James Potter's head appeared out of no where, “we're here to break you out!”

Harry watched as Sirius's and Peter's heads also appeared.

“What charms does she have on the bed?” Peter whispered, and Sirius pointed his wand at one of the mattresses, muttering under his breath.

“Just the standards. Proximity, Weight, and Danger ones. Nothing that can't be easily canceled.”

“I'm on it,” Peter replied as James conjured a stretcher for Remus. Pettigrew easily got rid of the Danger and Proximity charms, but swore when he got to the Weight one. “She put a ward on this one. We'll have to conjure rocks to take Remus's place.”

“Hey!” Harry whispered, and the four Marauders froze. “You can't leave me!”

The four adults shared looks, as if contemplating that they really could just leave him behind. Sirius, though, shook his head. “We can't risk it. She probably put more wards on your bed than anyone of the others. Besides, revenge is fun.”

Harry gaped. “What? But this is the Hospital Wing! You can't leave someone behind!”

The four shared evil grins as Remus got on to the stretcher rather dizzily and James Conjured stones to pacify the Weight Charm. “Our condolences, Collins. We'll send you postcards--”

“--letters--”

“--our best wishes--”

“--mocking laughter in our wake--”

“There will be no mocking laughter.”

The four winced (Harry grinned in satisfaction) and turned as Madam Pomfrey stepped out of her office, wand drawn and pointing at the miscreants.

“Grown men, still trying to break each out of the Hospital Wing. Honestly, don't you three have anything better to do? Even Mr. Collins here had the sense to not run away without proper medical care!”

The Marauders opened their mouths in protest to the last statement about Harry's common sense, but were cut off by Poppy's continuing rant.

“Charms are placed on the beds for good reason, you hooligans! If you want to visit you may do so, but nothing else!”

Madam Pomfrey punctuated her statement by making the rocks explode and disintegrate, levitating Lupin back onto the bed, and slamming her office door shut behind her once more.

“Well, she was wrong about one thing.” Harry said, and the Marauders turned to him with sour faces. “There will most certainly be mocking laughter.”

(OoO)

Potion Attempt #1:

“What the Hell are they doing?” Sirius asked, but neither James' nor Peter could answer. They watched in horrified fascination as Harry and Remus continued their battle of wills.

“Ha ha!” Harry cried in triumph. “You can not win!”

“Of course I will!” Remus returned. “The grace needed to perform numerous pranks and tricks without detection is deep within my nature. It cannot be beaten!”

“You want to bet on that? I've worked on a potions essay with Hermione, and had to carry a stack of books 'necessary for in-depth' thought, while running afoul of Slytherins!”

Madam Pomfrey stood off to the corner, taking notes of the newest potion's effects. This new concoction, while covering the effects of the plant so far, made Harry and Remus feel the odd desire to compete against each other.

By seeing how many olives they could balance on their noses.

Remus swore as his center of gravity shifted and he dropped the olives. "I can't believe it! Losing to Collins!"

Harry chuckled, and pointed his wand (taken from Madam Pomfrey at extreme protest) at the olives. "Finite Incantatum."

"What?" Remus exclaimed cluelessly, while the other three Marauders watched with amused expressions. "That's cheating!"

"No it's not," Harry responded calmly. "It's resourcefulness and strategy. Get used to it."

"Damn dimensional travelers."

"To quote Terry Boot," Harry replied airily. "Don't hate the player, hate the game."

"To quote Remus Lupin," Remus grumbled. "Shut the Hell up."

(OoO)

Potion #1 temporarily covers side-effects, but does not diminish or remove.

Makes test subjects challenge each to contests of balancing olives on their noses.

This effect was not expected, and is rather suspicious considering test subjects and potion maker. Must look into this further.

Potion #1: FAIL

(OoO)

Potion #3

"You did WHAT?"

Nymphadora Tonks entered the Hospital Wing, having planned on talking to Remus during his captivity while Poppy tried to find a cure for whatever was wrong with him.

Instead, she walked into a classic stand-off, minus the tumbleweed, as two werewolves growled and glared for dominance.

“The plant itself triggers werewolves,” Poppy escaped calmly, trying to stop herself from ripping her hair out in frustration. “Apparently in this potion we triggered that reaction. Collins and Lupin will be werewolves, without malevolence to humans, until it wears off. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to yell at our resident Potions Master for possibly messing it up on purpose.”

The death glare Poppy sent at her office, where Snape had set up shop, added little possibility for missing her skepticism at the word 'possibly'.

Tonks sighed and took a seat next to the rest of the watchers, who included James and Minerva, as most had set up shifts to watch the going entertainment.

“So, who did what to make the other angry?”

James waved airily at her, next really explaining anything, so she turned to McGonagall.

“Neither has done anything,” the elder witch explained. “As far as we can tell, they fighting for dominance.”

“Just because they can?”

“Just because they can.”

Tonks shook her head and sighed. “Men.”

One of the werewolves, whom Tonks was fairly certain was Remus, leaped across the room and attacked Collins, who had just previously

maneuvered his paw into such a way that he looked like he was biting his thumb.

“Classy,” Minerva muttered, and James looked at her oddly. “Shakespeare, Potter. I never figured that Collins would be a reader.”

She was interrupted as the two werewolves fell off the bed, paused and looked about the room in wide-eyed confusion, and then went back to fighting.

Madam Pomfrey briefly entered the room. She Conjured a stone wall between the two.

“Enough, you bloody animals!”

(OoO)

Potion #6

“...and then,” Harry continued, “Lockhart just runs out of the room, leaving the three of us to capture the pixies!”

“Lockhart?” Madam Pomfrey said dryly in passing. “Not knowing what he was doing? Impossible!”

“I'll have to tell Minerva about this,” Remus said as if looking forward to it, a cloudy look in his eyes. “Her one ridiculous celebrity infatuation... destroyed.”

“I think it was already destroyed when she saw him admit to stealing his book ideas from other people.”

Sirius and James shared evil looks, and then pulled out official looking Ministry of Magic parchment. “Keep talking, Collins.”

Harry grinned evilly, eyes slightly glazed and unfocused because of the potion, and continued. “He admitted to searching down various people who have faced Dark Creatures, then, after getting all the information, Obliviating them.”

“Obliviating them?” Sirius clarified. “As in permanently removed memories?”

“Precisely,” Harry answered with relish.

Peter leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. “Anyone could kill me now,” he remarked, “and I would die happy.”

Harry's eyes crackled a remnant of stark awareness in them. 'Don't say it if you don't mean it.'

(OoO)

Potion #8:

“This is... interesting.”

Remus glared daggers at the retreating Mediwitch who had just distributed a new testing potion. Her shoulders were shaking from concealing howls of laughter.

“I suppose that is one way to describe,” Harry said dryly, trying to ignore the Marauders' laughter. The laughter would probably be harder to ignore once Harry's potion began to affect him.

Remus had turned, without any other way to describe it, a dark mauve.

A completely unnatural, hard-to-ignore, blinding shade of mauve.

“It's the lycanthropy!” Remus howled in outrage, while Peter shook his head.

“Remember that personality test charm Lily hexed us with in sixth year?”

The mauve around Remus's face got darker. “No, and for your safety, I suggest you don't remember, either.”

“Let me guess,” Harry said. “Mauve?”

Sirius wiped tears of laughter away from his eyes. “Mauve!”

Remus huffed and crossed his arms.

Harry looked down at his arm and raised one eyebrow as it began to change color.

“Damn it,” he groaned, and stuffed his arms under the bedclothes. It was no use, though, as the color had no doubt spread to his face.

All remnants of laughter stopped as they watched Harry turn a greenish shade of black.

“Well,” James said, “that explains a lot.”

Harry fixed him with an icy glare.

“Do explain.”

Was it just him, or was his voice actually frightening enough to give James pause?

He continued to glare coolly at his father until he was given an answer.

“Oh come off it, Collins!” Sirius exclaimed. “What do you want us to pretend as if you’re NOT the opposite of everything we stand for?”

“That would be nice, seeing as I am certainly not the opposite of everything you stand for,” Harry responded dryly. His hand curled around his wand defensively.

He had certainly changed from everything he had expected to be. The dreams and nightmares, nightly visions and actual battles, and the month of capture by Death Eaters, had changed him into

something colder, darker than what he used to be. But what else had anyone expected?

He knew he wouldn't come out of this war completely innocent, on the off chance he even came out alive. He briefly quirked his lips humorlessly. All of his friends had expected to come out of this war unscathed, a child-like belief that they would continue to come out unharmed. Only he knew they wouldn't.

Eventually as sixth year had continued, the entirety of the close-knit group had come to understand that, and would have understood why he changed. This -- he looked at the suspicious gazes -- this world would not, because their war was different.

"Well, let's think," Sirius retorted mockingly. "Everyone, except for Collins, raise your hand if you have used an Unforgivable."

Harry's stomach twisted and it had nothing to do with the shadows of lingering effects from the plant. Little did they know that it was because of the other Sirius' death that he had used the Cruciatus Curse.

"Well, let's see," Harry snarled. "Everyone, except for me, raise your hand if a Death Eater killed your only family in front of you when you were fifteen. Because of your own stupidity," he muttered softly, not remembering that, as Animagi or werewolf, they could hear him.

"You aren't the only who has seen a loved one die, Collins! That excuses nothing!"

"Really?" Harry responded coldly. "Why?"

"Do you have no morality at all?" James asked. "The only thing separating us from them is the fact that we don't use curses like that?"

Harry laughed, the sharp noise bringing the temperature of the room down even faster.

“If that is the only thing separating you from Death Eaters, you are in serious trouble.” His gaze snaked towards Pettigrew, unnoticed except for by the rat Animagus himself. “Though, I suppose, you are just as prejudiced, if lazy in your cruelty.”

Harry immediately had two wands pointing at him, Remus and Pettigrew not moving. By looking closely, one could see a small bit of resigned agreement in Peter's eyes, and the experienced truth through Remus's. James and Sirius, though, were quivering in anger.

“What the Hell do you mean by that, you pathetic son of a--”

James couldn't finish the sentence, so exponential his anger, but Peter noted the momentary flash of humor in Collins's eyes at the almost completed insult.

“Yes, please tell us what you mean. We've always wanted to know the self-righteous opinion of a Death Eater,” Sirius continued, his eyes snapping coldly, surveying Harry for danger as the trained Auror that he was. “Keep it up, and I can get you an arrest warrant, with you wanted dead or alive.”

“I'm a cowboy, I got the night on my side,” Harry responded to the threat dryly, and Remus choked on a laugh.

'Another place where the faces are so cold, I'd drive all night just to get home.'

“You've never noticed the casual oppression of the Wizarding World?” Harry asked in disbelief. He was amazed that Muggleborns, who could see so easily the liabilities of the Wizarding society, were the ones belittled, like Hermione and the countless others ground down by prejudice.

'Okay, maybe not so surprised after all.'

“Whatever oppression you might think exists, it's nothing compared to what Voldemort has planned!” James snapped, and Harry sighed. This was not going the way he had planned. Harry opened his mouth.

“Wait, wait, James! Here comes the amazing defense!”

Whatever cool, rational thought Hermione had succeeded in pounding into Harry's head evaporated.

“I never said that it was, but a lesser evil isn't a great goal to aim for. Or are you saying that you like society as it was before Voldemort came along?”

“I wasn't too unhappy with it, yes!”

“My deepest condolences, Mr. Lupin, for having friends content with your suffering,” Harry said idly, his glare still fixated on Sirius. “I must apologize to the centaurs, giants, and house-elves, as well.”

All five paused and looked at the wall separating the Hospital from Madam Pomfrey's office, from where a suspicious choking sound just came.

“Your altruistic spirit is observed, Collins,” James said coldly. “But that still has nothing to do with the fact that you haven't denied being a Dark wizard.”

“No, it doesn't,” Harry agreed, hiding as wince as all four Marauders stiffened at his lack of protesting. “But it shows that the world isn't black and white. Death is sometimes necessary to combat death, and hatred is necessary to combat cruelty.”

((OOOOOOOOOO))

It appeared that they had on no uncertain terms disagreed with him, and made it obvious that they did so, falling back to their standard of making sure that Holly and Rose stayed far away from him. While relieved that not even Voldemort would assume any suspicious relation between Harry and the Potters, it saddened him that his family was simultaneously closer and farther than it had ever been before.

Madam Pomfrey had eventually found a cure to whatever was so damaging in the plant, possibly wishing to get them all separated before they came to blows. The cure wasn't complete, causing Snape to be offended by the challenge of the plant and delve into research, barely coming above ground from the dungeons, and Harry was reluctant to change into his Animagus form until necessary. Remus's transformation, Harry guessed, would be hell this full moon.

After being reluctantly being released from the Hospital Wing, Madam Pomfrey securing promises from himself and Remus along the way to not darken her doorstep for at least a fortnight (to which they both earnestly agreed), Harry had secured himself in the Library in much the same manner as Snape in his dungeon, researching new curses and spells for the upcoming duel.

Now that the day had come, Harry felt hideously unprepared.

The audience comprised of the Potters, McGonagall, Dumbledore, assorted other professors, and curious members of the Order, did not help at all.

“Second thoughts, Collins?” Moody called.

Much to Harry's surprise, Moody did not believe the Marauders assertion that Harry was Lucifer reincarnated, as Harry had sarcastically referred to himself once. He assumed that, regardless of his own actions, Moody had magically checked Harry's left arm and had known he was far from a Death Eater.

This lack of relative suspicion (since Moody was suspicious of everyone) had under no circumstances reduced their arguing or insults, though Harry had admitted full and wide that he was under no assumption of being able to defeat the ex-Auror

“Second thoughts, Moody?” Harry responded incredulously. “Get with it! I'm on about fifty or so!”

Moody barked a laugh, and Dumbledore's eyes twinkled.

“Since the rules have been repeated, countless throughout the last days,” Albus said with a glance towards the unrepentant Marauders, “I see no need to repeat them again. On the count of three.”

“One.”

Harry tightened the grip on his wand, going through a list of powerful hexes in his mind. He was completely serious when he said he couldn't beat Moody. There were very few who could. But his pride made it so the coming duel would not be easy.

He glanced surreptitiously at his parents. Even without winning, he wanted to give his parents a reason to respect him. It was the most Harry could hope for.

“Two.”

From across the way, Moody looked assured of victory, but suspicious rather than overconfident, which was no less than what he expected. To Moody, he was an unknown element, promise of no use of Dark Magic or no promise.

May the best man win.

“Three.”

Harry dove out of the way, not even waiting to see if Moody threw a curse at him. Still rolling, he waved his wand in a complicated motion, muttering under his breath until a leaden wall appeared.

Harry openly grinned. While easy to destroy, the lead insured that Moody couldn't see him.

Muttering in a guttural tongue, Harry made a jabbing move with his wand and watched as an invisible force pushed downward, creating a narrow, dark tunnel.

Working quickly now, as Moody sent spell after spell towards the rapidly weakening wall, Harry conjured shadowy shapes and

motioned them down the hole. He was halfway through covering the hole when Moody's forces rammed a hole through the wall.

“Corvsin!”

Harry ducked too late as a mild Slicing Curse hit his arm, creating a sharp wound that made Harry wince.

He responded with a powerful Stunner, but knew Moody's shield would stop it without problems.

Annoyed at getting hit so early, Harry scowled and concentrated on his next spell.

“Desdin!”

A stream of thick, oozing mud rushed out of his wand, through Moody's shield, and right onto his face.

Despite the recent enmity between groups, the audience howled with laughter as Harry Conjured a camera, took a picture, then tossed it to Holly who, he knew, probably had the best idea of how to use said picture.

It was even worth the Irremovable Jelly Legs Hex, which Harry couldn't get rid of except by waiting for it to fade.

Knowing he was an easy target, Harry ran as Moody angrily got rid of the mud and began to formulate an attack.

Friendly duel or not, Harry was now beginning to fear for his life.

Deciding now was as good a time as any, Harry mentally pushed the shadowy figures to come out in the open.

And they did so with a flourish.

Rose screamed in fright as a gigantic shadow shuddered out of the ground, roaring with fury. It was quickly followed by smaller, but no less ferocious-looking, figures.

The ex-Auror was singularly unimpressed, as he turned as back on the intangible shadows and Tripping Curse at Harry, to which Harry hastily created a shield, not expecting Moody to just ignore the creatures.

Moody sent a pattern of five Curses at the distracted teen, who had no choice but to pick the least dangerous-looking of them, diving into the path of a gray one he didn't know.

The spell changed its course, circling around Harry ominously with the sound of a muted scream.

Then it disappeared, though Moody did not continue on the offensive. Rather, the ex-Auror loosened the grip on his wand and looked at Harry expectantly.

“Erm--”

Apparently most of the Order members were confused as well, because they were looking at Moody's lack of constant vigilance in shock.

“Hey, Collins!” James shouted. “Here's you chance to--”

He was cut off as the spell, obviously delayed, began its work.

Harry stared in shock as the Veil, the one hidden in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries, appeared in all its ominous glory. The veil itself swayed in a nonexistent breeze, voices quietly whispering just out of sight.

His mind supplied all the details to the dramatic scene. Tonks gasped as a copy of herself appeared, slowly crawling over to Moody's unconscious body, who, in real life, looked irritated at his other self ever getting him by a spell.

Various members of the Order were replicated in an intangible scene, acting out the parts in complete silence.

Remus looked around in morbid curiosity. He recognized himself, and several of the others, but where were the others, like Sirius, James, Peter, or Lily/ Dumbledore knew that the five of them together were a very strong fighting force. There was no rational reason for only one of them to be there...

Then he saw the students.

He saw Collins trying to help a boy the same age, and realized with a start that it had to be Neville Longbottom, pain from the curses written on both of their faces. He looked up and saw the minuscule heads of Luna Lovegood and Ginny Weasley looking fearfully at the scene. Why on Earth were there students, because he could tell that they were no older than fifteen or sixteen, be fighting Death Eaters?

His sensitive eyes twitched as he heard a sound. Turning to look at the real Collins, he recognized the high sound: a sound of grief, a keening sound, his eyes riveted on two fighters near the veil itself.

He didn't recognize the two of them, both with sunken, haunted features, though the wizard seemed to be in somewhat better condition. The witch had dry, lusterless hair, with wild eyes and an ugly snarl on her face. The wizard was a bit naggingly familiar, like someone who was a couple years above him in school and who he had bumped into on the street, with black hair and blue eyes.

The Order transfixed at the scene, watched as the wizard seemed to laughed, the witch screamed silently in fury, and a red spell caught the wizard, pushing him directly into the path of the Veil.

The veil which parents used in horror stories to keep their children from exploring strange places they knew they weren't supposed to go.

They all watched as the man disappeared into the Veil forever, the witch silently screaming in triumph.

They all saw the fifteen-year-old image of Collins cry out the man's name in horror, running madly towards the Veil even as it was too late.

They all saw Remus grab Collins and pull him back, even as the teenager struggled and fought to get to the center of the room, finally standing limply in defeat as Remus continue to say unknown words silently.

They all watched in horror as Collins ripped away from the unprepared Remus, and chased after the fleeing witch with hate boiling in his eyes.

So transfixed by the scene they were watching they didn't see the living Collins wordlessly slash at his scene with his wand, destroying the fabric of the illusion in a spell that didn't exist, before dropping his wand.

Only then did they see Collins, trembling in anger, quickly cross the area between himself and Moody, the self-same look of hatred flashing in his eyes.

Though they were watching, all, of them, several cried out in shock as Harry reared back and punched the ex-Auror on the jaw, before pouncing and knocking Moody to the ground.

“Collins!” Many of the Order members yelled, trying to stop the fight, but Harry didn't heed any of them.

“You absolute bastard!” Harry yelled, banging Moody's hand against the ground until the ex-Auror involuntarily relinquished the grip on his wand.

“You have no right to see what I have seen! Especially the memories I have tried so bloody hard to not think of!” Moody opened his mouth to answer, but Harry punched him again, by the sound of it knocking out a few teeth.

“Is there a reason? You might have thought, 'Oh here's a good opportunity! Let's go through Collin's memories and pick out the worst ones we can find, eh? Sounds like a smashing good time to me!'”

Harry had never prided himself on his sarcasm, it getting him into more trouble than it was worth (usually), but now it flew out of his mouth without thought, him needing to shove his newly reawakened anger and grief onto someone else.

“Or was it something else? You were curious as to why I had ever used the Cruciatus Curse?” There were a few gasps among the people who didn't know that Harry had used an Unforgivable, but he ignored them, baning Moody's hand against the ground again as the man tried to push Harry away from him by returning the favor of punches. “Congratulations,” he snarled, “You now know that I used it on Bellatrix Lestranger for killing my godfather! You want a more complete list of my crimes?” Punch. “I made a Death Eater slowly bleed to death for killing a household of people I didn't even know! I slaughtered Seamus Finnigan's parents after their minds were turned into mush by Voldemort's Cruciatus and Imperius, as there was no other way to stop them! What? You didn't want to see any of those scenes?”

Harry had barely noticed the yells, and later the stunned silence, of the Order until someone pulled him off Moody.

Harry looked around with a snarl and saw that it was Pettigrew who had pulled him away as James and Sirius helped Moody stand.

“I don't even want to get started on you,” Harry snarled without thinking, but Peter filed it away for later use. However, he couldn't pursue the matter right now, as Harry and Moody, nursing a broken jaw and black eye, glared daggers at each other.

Dumbledore took the opportunity to clear his throat. “Well, through rather... unorthodox...maneuvers, Chris Collins is the winner.”

“Goody,” Harry bit out sarcastically before Summoning both his and Moody's wands without said wand, not really caring that people would

know he could do wandless magic. Just as Moody looked ready to protest the teenager's possession of his wand, Harry grinned maliciously and Banished it into the Forbidden Forest.

“Good luck finding it,” Harry said, shaking himself out of Pettigrew's grip. “It's such a shame that you have to know the location of something to Summon it.”

Harry turned around to face the castle, the mask of cold anger falling away to betray his grief that had never healed. He marched determinedly back to the castle, yelling once more, “An utter shame!”

“Wandless magic?” He heard someone behind him cry out in disbelief.

“It's the power he knows not!” Harry shouted, aimed at the milling wizards. “So don't tell anyone!”

He stepped into the Entrance Hall to see a self-important owl swoop towards him, holding a letter with the Dark Mark painted ominously on the envelope.

Harry glared at the owl, who looked irritated at the lack of respect, but otherwise unaffected.

“Hasn't this whole experience been bad enough?” He groaned out loud before taking the letter and flipping it over, instantly recognizing the cold and elegant script. “Malfoy.

“Bloody wonderful.”

He had no idea how much worse it was about to get.

((OOOOOOOOOO))

Chapter 15: The First Strike

“I can't believe it.”

Alastor grumbled comments under his breath, not that he would allow anyone to describe his actions as 'grumbling,' especially Albus, who was listening to said grumbling with silent amusement. “I lost to a seventeen-year-old, and Collins at that.”

Madam Pomfrey silently brought out a vial of bruise-removing potion, not voicing her thoughts that she, at least, had not expected the ex-Auror to win. He was past fifty with poor mobility at the very least, for Merlin's sake.

Moody drank the potion, the magic instantly removing the dark-colored circles around his eyes.

“I suppose that goes to show that I shouldn't have expected a civil magical fight out of Collins, should I?”

Albus's eyes twinkled. “I believe the phrase I should use is 'constant vigilance,' Alastor. You were not prepared for a physical fight. But you would have been severely upset with anyone else for not being ready.”

Moody centered a lopsided glare on Albus. “Still. Perhaps a second duel...”

“No,” Albus said flatly, his mouth twitching in poorly hidden amusement. “Alastor, my dear friend, you can't win in a physical fight.” He held up a hand to stop Moody's protests. “With your knowledge of spells, you can still beat an above average dueler. However, it seems as if Mr. Collins was trained to be far above average, so the odds of you beating him are low.

“To put it bluntly, Alastor, you're getting old.” Moody spluttered before collecting himself.

“So are you, you eclectic old goat!”

“Yes,” Albus said, looking entirely pleased with himself as he took a lemon drop out of his pocket, “but I can get away with it.”

((OOOOOOOO))

He was in his spot again.

He had driven most of his classmates nuts, as seeing him suddenly appear out of the shifting light made them shriek or jump back in terrified surprise. He had gotten quite a few scoldings from the professors and Hermione, none of whom could understand the idle adrenaline that helped him think. Ron called him barmy, Hermione called him irresponsible, Snape called him arrogant, and Ginny called him the most irritatingly moody person on the face of the planet.

Harry called the rest of them noisy and told to back off so he could think in peace.

He was once more perched on the banister of a moving staircase, idly readjusting his balance at every swing and swoop. It had become his regular haunt, in this dimension and the previous, because no one wanted to startle him by disturbing him and making him fall off the wrong side. They had no way of knowing that Harry's innate sense of balance would stop him from ever doing that.

Now he was there once more, silently berating himself for giving away too much information in his anger. It was only luck that had kept them from recognizing Sirius and asking pointed questions. Not only did he allow that memory to play out, shocked as he was, he yelled that the man was his godfather. Now, if anyone did discover the identity of the other Sirius, Harry's facade would hardly stand up to a feather.

The prophecy... Harry needed to remind the members of the Order that he would have a large part to play in their war, their's, despite the fact that Harry knew no way of getting back to his own world and would most likely be stuck in this dimension. However, informing them immediately after fighting Moody and yelling at them was definitely not the best idea he had ever had.

He cringed as he remembered punching Moody. As much as the ex-Auror had deserved it, and Harry was definitely not changing his mind on that one, it would make the upcoming year very, very uncomfortable.

But right now, Moody wasn't his main concern. Keeping his identity a secret wasn't even his main concern.

The letter in his hand was.

He looked back to his performance in the Defense classroom. Sure, he had acted like a haughty, arrogant, self-serving Pureblood, but was that really enough for the Death Eaters to believe that he would want to join their cause? Were they really that blind about the danger they had just created by having Lucius Malfoy write such an incriminating letter?

Or were they so secure that it didn't matter?

A horrid feeling in his stomach made him think it was the latter.

'Mr. Chris Collins,

Congratulations on maintaining high taste and Wizarding dignity among current times, where the common and misguided rule. As such, you have been invited to meet with forces attempting to correct this fallacy under the rule of our Lord, Lord Voldemort. If you should choose to accept this high honor of having a say in the future government of Wizarding Britain, please respond to this letter accordingly.

As I am sure you understand, not many of the works in progress, due to the need for the construction of culture and government, can be here stated, as the current government acknowledges my associates and I as 'anarchists.' Despite this complication, your response is expected within the next few days. Your lineage as a pureblood should be ample reason to respond with acceptance and curiosity.

To a more secure world,

Lucius Malfoy'

'Eugh,' Harry thought succinctly, reading the letter once more. 'How can anyone not see that this is wrong?'

The question was 'what now?'

Accepting the invitation was, of course, out of the question. Even if he was willing to surround himself with Death Eaters, Harry could never manage the cruelty necessary to mask his subterfuge. Besides, Snape was able to get much more information than a new Death Eater would be able to.

Besides, he didn't trust himself to not snap and start hexing Lestranger--no, Black-- and Malfoy to death, which would doubtlessly tip Voldemort off.

And, if Harry did decide to go along with this--this offer, the scrawled scar of 'Mudblood' along his forearm would be a bit suspicious, as well.

The only thing Harry could think of was to go to this first meeting, seem agreeable, and then capture Malfoy. Not likely, considering the blond aristocrat's dueling skills, but Harry could at least attempt it before making his escape.

That sounded the best of any possibility, because Harry was, if nothing else, confident in his ability to get away even if it meant showing his Animagus form.

No, now the problem was explaining to Dumbledore and the rest of the Order as to how Harry had become chosen, which meant explaining his play-acting as a pureblood, which would throw into doubt his acting as a Muggleborn, which would throw into doubt every lie Harry had carefully created and tailored in this dimension.

And he refused to let his identity be known, especially now of all times, when they had all witnessed him going mad and attacking Moody.

So the best course of action, Harry decided, would be to tell Snape what mess he had gotten himself into, and see what the Potions Master had to say, as well as what creative insults Harry could bear the brunt of for this particular situation.

He leaped lightly off the banister, spinning to face the stairs going downwards, and came face to face with Peter Pettigrew, who looked as if he had just been about to tap him on the shoulder.

Harry raised one eyebrow coldly. "Something I can help you with, Pettigrew?"

The Animagus looked at him reprovingly at his tone. "Yes, actually, Collins. We need to talk."

"No," Harry drawled, "I don't think we do. Besides the fact I have more important things to do, running back into Voldemort's clutches sounds much more enjoyable."

Harry turned away, expecting the older wizard to give up completely, a course of action Harry would have been completely thrilled with, when Pettigrew held out a familiar wooden object.

Harry's wand.

Harry growled in anger and stepped threateningly towards the rat Animagus, pausing when Pettigrew slightly bent the wand between his hands.

"And why," Harry snapped, "are you threatening to break my wand, Pettigrew?"

Pettigrew gave a Marauderish smirk. "Because it seems as if there is some unknown conflict between us, and I want to know what it is. Threatening you seemed to be the only applicable method of getting you to cooperate."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "And what," he hissed, so violently Pettigrew seemed to debate taking a step backwards before steeling himself, "do you think will stop me from simply making another one?"

"Because a wand that chose you is better suited than even a tailor-made one," Pettigrew said triumphantly. "And besides, it's the principle of the thing. You don't want to lose your wand, especially by someone you hate as much as me."

Harry debated the chances of him charging at Pettigrew and successfully getting his wand back. Based on the rat Animagus's knowing look, the chances were slim. Harry also knew that simply surrendering his wand was not an option, as his magic strongly protested the thought of giving up wand voluntarily.

Harry pulled the knife he had become accustomed to carrying out of its sheath and smiled coldly at Pettigrew.

"Lead on."

And he thought gleefully, unless he was much mistaken, Pettigrew was now very much regretting his decision to go first.

Especially if the fearful glances back at him were any indication.

((OOOOOOOOO))

"Fine, Pettigrew," Harry snapped as the two entered the Library, the unacknowledged neutral zone between Hogwarts' conflicts, usually between the Houses. "I've played your game. What do you want?"

"You're not Muggleborn, are you?"

Harry spluttered. Of all the things he expected Pettigrew to say, that was certainly not it. A feeling of panic was rising up in him, but he beat it down so as to have his wits about him in this upcoming verbal battle.

“What do you mean, not Muggleborn?” Harry continued in a (hopefully) indignant tone. “What? You think Muggleborns are incapable of dueling or some such nonsense, that you automatically assume I can't possibly not have wizarding origins?”

Pettigrew's calm look had slightly fallen at that. “Oh, of course, Collins. I'm just friends with Lily because I pity her. Of course that's it.”

“Then kindly explain your comment!”

“You're not Muggleborn,” Peter repeated, his eyes glimmering intelligently. “Your godfather, Collins. You screwed up there. On the small odds that Muggle parents would actually have a godparent tradition, the odds that their child would be magical is even lower. The odds that said child would have a rare magical talent make those odds nearly nonexistent. The fact that said Muggleborn child who is a Parselmouth would have a magical godfather is impossible.

“So, to put it bluntly, fess up.”

Harry swallowed his gaping with a dry chuckle. “Oh, poor Pettigrew, pretending to be a Ravenclaw.” He smiled grimly at Pettigrew's look of annoyance. “You forgot that being Muggle doesn't mean one is unaware of magic.”

Pettigrew's expression was blank.

“My great-aunt was a witch,” Harry invented, “and my family spent a lot of time around magical friends. Thus, I inherited magical genes, though am Muggleborn, and did have a magical godfather without any suspicious goings-on.” Now Pettigrew was gaping, just as Harry was mentally falling flat on the floor with relief. “And I'd thank you not to mention my godfather, actually. Any other questions, accusations, or general suspicions?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” Harry drummed his fingers on the table, signaling for Pettigrew to make his point, Harry's heart beating in the same fast rhythm as his fingers. “You said you're parents were

Muggles, correct? So, when did they meet Voldemort?”

'Meet Voldemort?' Harry wondered aghast. 'I never told anyone they had met Voldemort...' “Except for when they were killed,” Harry said bluntly, hoping to guilt Pettigrew to stand off, “never.”

The rat Animagus seemed pretty certain that Harry had mentioned his parents at one point going against Voldemort, so Harry, not knowing for sure if he hadn't, went with it.

“Really,” Pettigrew drawled, his eyes plainly saying 'checkmate.' “How, then, does the prophecy apply to you?”

Dozens of memory-altering spells, mixed with quite a few inventive curses, flashed through Harry's mind. 'Damn, damn, damn!' He thought violently.

“Strike one, Collins,” Pettigrew said softly with a smug air of victory. “But let's move on, shall we?”

Harry nearly quivering with rage at himself and Pettigrew, merely raised one eyebrow.

“Mei signum--”

Harry looked at Pettigrew in confusion. He knew for a fact that the Animagus couldn't perform wandless magic, and he wasn't holding his wand, which was on the table right in front of him.

Right in front of him! Harry didn't even have time to dodge before Pettigrew picked up his wand and said the last syllable of the spell.

“--utor!”

The gray spell hit Harry, who snarled at Pettigrew but paused when the spell didn't seem to do anything. Then he shuddered as cold seeped through him, and the old scar on the crook of his elbow appeared to split open, red liquid seeping through his sleeve. The

same happened to a scar on his face and his knee, which also emitted a series of chilling cracks, but Harry didn't feel a thing. The spell finished by surrounding Harry in a haze of deep red with tinges of a sickly, brackish yellow.

Snarling at the remembrance of the other Pettigrew stealing his blood, Harry turned to Pettigrew with a look of hatred, ignoring the man's shocked and denying expression.

"What the Hell is this?" He demanded, seeing the rat Animagus through two completely separate, though just as potent, red hazes.

"It can't be," Pettigrew whispered hoarsely. "I did the spell wrong. This can't be right."

"Maybe if you would say what that damn spell was meant to do," Harry said in a deadly pleasant tone, "I would tell you."

"Mei signum utor," Pettigrew said, still as in shock, "Find my marks."

Harry chuckled dryly, his eyes still glinting with anger, and the sandpaper sound seemed to snap Pettigrew out of it.

"Apt title, that," Harry said. "Well, if it is supposed to show what marks you left on me."

Pettigrew flinched, but didn't say a word. Harry continued cruelly, taking advantage of the fact that the man he had hated for so long was at the mercy of his knowledge.

"Let's see," Harry said ponderingly, in a mockery of sincerity. "My elbow, yes, that one was certainly you. Right after you killed a classmate of mine. Quite callously, if I remember correctly, before you tied me up, cut me with a knife, and let your master have a go at me."

Harry grinned icily as the words "killed" and "master" sliced into Pettigrew.

“I believe he was seventeen years old, that wizard you killed. What else? Ah, yes, my knee, too. Well, that one is pretty self-explanatory. You didn't use a spell on it, either. Just smashed your silver hand into it and broke the whole thing, smashing it from the other direction as well to make sure you did the job well enough. Of course, that just happened recently, so I remember it fairly well.”

Peter had his head in his hands at this point, but he couldn't block out Harry's cold voice.

“It seems you only had the balls to do that once you realized that, as a werewolf Animagus, the silver would almost completely incapacitate me, meaning you wouldn't have to immediately scurry off and hide. I must say,” Harry continued inexorably, “that I didn't know you were responsible for one of the gouges in my face. Thanks for that, by the way.”

Harry, seeing the effect the words had on Pettigrew, took unholy glee in it and pressed on.

“I'm not quite so good as Hermione when it comes to remembering what specific colors stand for, but I'll try my best. These two, really, are the easiest to figure out, especially with you in mind.

“Red, of course, represents pain, but I'm sure you already know that. Unless I miss my guess completely, this particular shade means the Cruciatus Curse. That seems to fit, considering you enjoyed casting it so very many times, and it almost certainly can be considered a 'mark.' The deep tone, too,” He tsked his tongue mock-scoldingly at Pettigrew, “casting it on someone so many times. Shame on you. The yellow, though... I hadn't thought magic fine-tuned enough to consider treachery a mark.”

Pettigrew had jerked his head up at this, looking at Harry in lost confusion.

“ Yes, Pettigrew, treachery. Betrayal, lack of loyalty, breaking someone's trust in the most profound way possible. Yes, I believe it is

starting to sink in, now. You, my friend, apart from betraying the Potters, Lupin, Black, and the Order, though I didn't find out about all of that until a few years ago, got the dubious honor of betraying the whole of the Wizarding World. After all," Harry said in mock-thoughtfulness, "what else would one call returning Voldemort to life and his former 'glory.'

"To answer your unasked question, yes, you were a Death Eater." Pettigrew flinched at this, and Harry's cold, vengeful smile grew, and his eyes flashed darkly. "Not because of any thoughts that Purebloods should reign and 'Muggleborns should die like the scum they are.' No, you became a Death Eater, betrayed your friends, beliefs, and world because of your own cowardice."

Harry finished in a hiss. "So, 'Strike one', Pettigrew. Stay away from me. And, if I may take my leave, this inquisition is over."

Peter didn't even move after Harry stalked away, slamming the Library door behind him. He didn't move, staying deep in horrified thought as the sun slowly sank and the sky turned a deep shade of red, not stirring as Holly sneaked through the Library under James's Invisibility Cloak and grabbed her video recorder. He was adrift in a wild sea of his own thoughts, the past, and a haunted accusing voice laying out the faults and cruelties of his other-dimensional self.

((OOOOOOOOO))

Left.

Harry swooped down a forgotten hallway, his brisk footsteps making stark marks against the dust, his cloak billowing in a manner similar to Snape's, though Harry was paying no attention to this. The faded portraits made wispy comments about his apparent distemper and murmured to their neighbors about how young people were always creating a drama about something. A lone novel skittered nervously out of his path, making squeaking, scolding sounds as Harry didn't even slow down from his march to step around the book.

Right.

Harry was completely fed up with this dimension. Yes, his parents, Sirius, and doubtlessly countless others were all alive. But they despised for what he was, especially since Harry couldn't bear to tell them who he was. This dimension was frighteningly similar but yet not similar at all. Voldemort had far more influence, Harry was invited to be a Death Eater, a Death Eater of all things, Wormtail was apparently guiltless in this dimension, and Harry kept making more and more mistakes.

There was a deep, drenching rain coming from the sky, one that the earlier cloudless sky did not foretell. The wind drove it unto him like needles, and his cloak was blowing around with a mind of its own, but Harry paid it no mind. The weather was an amazingly apt description of his mood.

He was being whipped around in the wind, not knowing what was about to happen, and people paid his situation no mind, except to brush the occasional stinging pain off with a momentary flash of annoyance.

Right again.

More than anyone else, he blamed himself for this knotted mess that this new dimension had become. It was he, Harry, who had decided not to reveal who he was, curb the Dark Magic, and join his newly found family. It was he who was suspicious and therefore considered suspicious. It was he who attacked Moody, he who forced such tension between himself and his unknowing family, he who just revealed to Pettigrew more than anyone needed to know.

And it was he who just deliberately enjoyed another's suffering, in a manner eerily reminiscent of Voldemort himself.

Straight, and--

Harry looked at the broom shed, not even bothering to drown his wand, and the door creaked open.

He critically surveyed to selection of brooms before grabbing the one he knew to be the fastest, if the most unstable. Shutting the door behind him, Harry marched into the center of the field.

Sure, sitting on the stair rail was the best way to think, to figure out problems, but nothing compared to flying. Just the unreal edge of recklessness that made all other problems slip away, the total joyful concentration necessary to pull off the most daring moves.

It was as Ron and he had always said to Hermione: Reading books and figuring things out might eventually solve problems, but flying meant there were none.

And he took to the air in a steep spiral, towards the clouds that were weeping on him, his mind on nothing but flight.

Nothing, no direction, no problems. Nothing but flight.

((OOOOOOOO))

Dumbledore was famous for his unnerving ability to tell who was at his door at any time of the day, and he generally had a good idea as to why they were coming to his office. Most people thought that Dumbledore knew everything, but this, this was certainly something he did not expect.

“Don't say a word,” Harry said sourly after Dumbledore admitted him into his office. “Not one word.”

Dumbledore obligingly kept his comments to himself, with not even a twitch to display his amusement. Harry glared, though, knowing full well that the Headmaster was mentally cackling, but sat down civilly enough and managed to keep his scathing comments about lemon drops to himself.

“Now, how can I assist you?”

The look of mild amusement was immediately crossed off of Harry's face, and Albus did not take that as a good sign. His suspicions

increased exponentially as the teen threw a letter onto the desk in between them.

Albus quickly glanced through the letter, and, looking at Harry and using a drier tone than most had ever heard, said, "Life around you never ceases to be interesting. Do I even want to imagine how Lucius got the impression that you were pureblooded?"

"No," Harry sighed, slinking further into the seat, "probably not."

"Do you have any plans as to how to answer this?"

Harry's mouth twitched. "I asked Snape and McGonagall for their advice."

"And?"

"They laughed at me."

"Was this before or after Mrs. Norris attacked you?"

Harry froze at the question and looked down at himself. The damnable cat had ambushed him as he was walking near the Prefect bathroom after his flight, hissing malevolently and eyes turning yellow. Scratching and spitting, Mrs. Norris reattached herself to his head. Grumbling with annoyance, Harry had tried to get the feline off, but had only succeeded in making her stick her claws further out. Blinded by the bulk of Mrs. Norris feet covering his eyes. So stumbling and waving his arms wildly in front of him, Harry brushed his hand against the unfortunately placed panel, and entered the bathroom, falling into the equally unfortunately placed bath-tub.

The one that magically filled with water when the bathroom was entered by an authorized person.

So Harry, still dripping wet and covered with multi-colored magical bubbles, locked the cat in the bathroom (who was howling quite hair-raisingly), and turned around to see James and Sirius grinning at him vindictively, Sirius hitting Harry with a spell that he didn't know.

He soon found out, after several failed drying charms, that he would stay soaked and covered with multi-colored magical bubbles until the spell wore off.

“After,” Harry said, taking the letter back and sighing with misfortune at the entire event. “After.”

Chapter 16: Animal Kingdom...Aristocrats and All

Harry looked challengingly at a small, faded blue book that had scurried into a corner in an attempt to escape his grasp. The book squeaked in fright at Harry's predatory look, and, pattering away, tried to make it to the nearest window. It didn't make it, Harry wandlessly Summoning it from midair.

“Finally, you obnoxious little reference text! I can't believe you kicked up such a fuss...”

The book, apparently taking offense to this, blew a raspberry and proceeded to call him a wide variety of names, some of which Harry hadn't even heard of, in a high-pitched nasally tone.

“Shush, book!” Harry shook it in his hand, but the book merely got louder. “Oh, for Merlin's sake! Stupefy!”

The spell silenced the book, but not before it called into question Harry's exact species and usual method of communication.

“Oh, that's just wonderful!” Harry said waspishly to the silent book in his hand. “I have not chased you down five stories in this castle just for you to mouth off!” Sighing, and grumbling about how the books always behaved for Hermione and Luna, he opened it to the index.

“Mei...mei signum... utor! Ha!”

Flipping quickly to the page, Harry still fumed over the incident with Pettigrew. Despite his effective crushing of the man's line of questioning, the rat Animagus had still managed to find a hole in Harry's story, and that wasn't good at all.

Harry shrugged, his mind concentrating on the more important task. There was nothing he could do about it, short of a memory charm, and Harry wasn't so proficient at those that he could reasonably hope to get away with it. He'd just have to hope that Pettigrew felt guilty enough not to remember it, or, at least, not bring it up with anyone. Ever.

Or at least until Harry had time to practice memory charms.

Sighing and shaking his head, Harry went back to reading the tiny, crabbed writing in the book.

“Yes, yes, I know the effects...After-effects? I shall proceed to skip that like the Gryffindor I am...Ah ha! Procedure...”

Harry quickly skimmed over how to cast the spell, and, deciding to test it on whatever Death Eater he might have an opportunity to duel with, shut the book.

He was about to set it down when he heard voices from a fair distance away.

“No, Rose, you're too young!”

“I'm too young? That's why you're not going to tell me anything?”

“...Yes.”

“But that's not fair! You're too young, too!”

“Yes, but I came up with a way to get around that. You haven't, and that's the difference.”

“I'm only nine years old! How can you honestly expect me to be able to get the information?”

The smug look on Holly's face was audible in her voice. “Exactly. You're too young. And nothing can change that except for the passage of about eight years.”

“Blackmail could change that.”

Silence fell, and Harry used the opportunity to put the still Stunned book into his pocket and slide away through the shadows, uninterested in their bickering.

“Blackmail will certainly not change that!” Holly squawked, and then quieted. “How did you find out about my tapes, anyway?”

Tapes? Harry paused. Perhaps this was worth listening to, after all.

“I'm not telling you that! Give me some credibility here!”

Holly muttered something unintelligible, and probably highly unfriendly.

“Besides,” Rose continued. “I'm not the one who just leaves out tapes of Order meetings and random places of the castle!”

“Shush, Rose! Do you think you could be any louder!”

There was a sound of someone taking a deep breath, as if Rose was preparing to do just that.

“I was being sarcastic! Besides, I do not leave tapes out! I erase them as soon as I see them. The only one I have left is the one of the Library yesterday, and that one probably has nothing in it, anyway!”

Harry paled at the mention of Holly's last tape. Yesterday in the Library? There was no chance of him letting anyone, especially one of the Potters, see that.

“Well, I think I should watch that one, just in case there IS something interesting!” Rose cried indignantly.

“Oh, yeah? I've got two things that says you won't...Longer legs.”

And which that, there was the sound of the two sisters running up the staircase towards Holly's room.

“Locomotor Mortis.”

Harry stepped out of the shadows as his spell hit Holly, and Rose quickly turned to see what happened.

“Collins!” Holly yelled angrily, though there was a bit of fright in her voice. “Take the spell off! NOW!”

Harry quickly debated his options. He didn't want to use any spells on Holly, but he wanted her to see that video even less. Rose was completely out of the question: he refused to put any spells on her or follow her to find an opportunity to steal the tape.

So, clenching his teeth in distaste, and promising to be nice to Mrs. Norris next time he saw her to make up for this, Harry made eye contact with Holly.

'Legilimens.'

There was a weak resistance, but Harry easily bypassed it and searched for the location of the tape. He saw a memory of Holly entering a room behind the picture of a clock, having moved the hands to enter, and sliding the tape behind the coat rack.

'Bingo,' Harry thought, before swiftly exiting Holly's mind, the whole thing happening so quickly Holly didn't even feel it.

Harry pulled out his wand and cast, “Finite incantatum,” at a stair a couple above Holly.

Multi-color sparks flew off before the stair appeared as normal.

“It appears that your father and his hooligan friends are trying to catch me,” Harry said, having known the step was covered in spells but not having done anything about it yet. “I'd be more careful.”

Then he took the spell off Holly and moseyed off in the opposite direction.

As soon as he heard Holly and Rose fighting up the stairs again, Harry spun around and raced for a nearby purple curtain.

“Open,” he hissed, and dove through the passageway just as James and Sirius entered the corridor.

“So, is anything important happening this week?” Sirius asked innocently.

James turned to look at his friend with a confused expression. “Nothing that I am aware of... Why?”

“Just wondering,” Sirius answered mildly. He waited until James had shrugged and turned to face forward again.

“So Lily's birthday isn't tomorrow?”

James blinked slowly before jumping nearly a foot in the air.

“BLOODY HELL! I FORGOT!”

Sirius watched with raised eyebrows as James ran helter-skelter up the staircase, neatly jumping the lone stair they had booby-trapped to catch Collins.

“Ridiculous,” he said aloud, albeit in a tone of amusement. “He can remember exactly which stair is hexed, out of all the stairs in Hogwarts, but he can't remember his own wife's birthday. Absolutely ridiculous.”

((OOOOOOOOO))

After sealing the passageway behind him, Harry transformed into a werewolf and padded through the dark at a sure-footed lightning speed. Ignoring passageways that winded off into other sections of the castle, Harry ran towards the one he knew (through the experience of previously running into Lily and James), changed back into himself, and shot through the entrance way.

He paused to cover himself with an Invisibility Charm, and then dashed off to the picture of the clock. However, upon turning the corner, Harry screeched to a abrupt and ceremonious halt.

'Damn!'

((OOOOOOOOO))

Holly ran down the corridor, well ahead of the much shorter Rose. After bounding up endless staircases, barely having time to give a sketchy wave to Nearly Headless Nick, who looked appalled at the lack of respectful greeting, and making sure no one saw her running, she was almost there.

She paused and turned around to stick her tongue out at Rose, then turned the corner and nearly squeaked in fright.

'Oh no!'

((OOOOOOOOO))

James Potter raced towards his room to grab some money, mentally scolding himself for forgetting his wife's birthday. It had completely escaped him, and if he didn't find a gift that looked like he had spent a lot of time looking for it, then he wouldn't need Sybil to predict his soon removal to the couch.

Permanently.

He rounded the corner, hoping that no one was there, only to screech to a halt in utter dismay.

“Honey!”

James put an innocent expression on his face and walked up to his wife. “What are you up to?”

Lily raised her eyebrows.

She looked at James' face, red from the effort running, and then her daughter's, which didn't look any better.

She held up a tape between her thumb and forefinger.

“I found this behind the coat rack. Whose is it?”

The question seemed innocent, but the look on Lily's face was far from merely curious.

“I only ask, because a tape means someone has been using an experimental video camera. My experimental video camera. Which is my project to getting my Masters in Technology Magics.

So, does anyone have the guts to claim this?”

They all turned to look as Rose puffed around the corner, looking distinctly unhappy and shouting unintelligibly. She stopped as soon as she saw her parents and sister.

Lily fixed the death glare on her youngest. “And what would you know about this?”

Looking fruitlessly for an escape, or perhaps some help, Rose decided to give up the goods.

She pointed at Holly.

((OOOOOOOO))

Harry cursed silently as he saw the whole Potter family congregate, Lily herself holding the offending tape.

Dismissing all the noise, as well as the arrival of an out-of-breath Rose, Harry slowly crept towards Lily, and, most importantly, the tape held loosely in her hand. He was almost there, just a couple feet further...

Then Rose pointed at Holly.

Lily clamped the video tightly in her grip. “Holly?” She asked in quiet anger.

The teen in question promptly averted her gaze.

And all Hell broke loose.

“WHAT COULD YOU HAVE POSSIBLY BEEN DOING WITH MY VIDEO CAMERA, YOUNG LADY? EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHAT WERE YOU DOING WITH IT IN A MAGICAL-CENTERED PLACE LIKE HOGWARTS!!”

Harry, wincing at the initial burst of noise, especially after just being in his Animagus werewolf form, did his best to ignore it, and inch even closer to Lily.

Just as she was angrily brandishing the tape, Harry leaped closer and latched onto her arm, yanking the video free.

Then he ran for his life.

“AND JUST WHO WAS THAT!”

Harry scurried back into one of the passageways, clasping the video to his chest, and wondering if it was really worth the effort after all.

He walked quietly through the passageway, heading back to the Library, where he could at least claim an alibi of reading so no one would think him of being the one to steal it.

He pointed his wand at it, muttering an acid spell that completely dissolved the tape and the film inside.

Then he walked into the Library calmly, as if he didn't just walk through a wall that was from no known secret passage.

He checked his watch, hoping that the unexpected trip didn't take up too much of his time.

His eyes widening, Harry shot out of the Library, running full-stop towards the Headmaster's office, cast a glamour on his robes as he went, only having two minutes before he would be late for a very

important date that was slightly more important than a game of croquet, but, swearing to the part of himself that sounded very reminiscent of Luna, that he would get flamingos involved if he could.

((OOOOOOOOO))

“Let's go over this one more time,” Harry said, not thinking he had heard straight... “You want me to go meet Lucius Malfoy.”

At Dumbledore's benign nod, Harry took a deep breath and tried not to explode. “Followed by a grim, a rat, and a freaking stag?”

There was a slight pause, before Dumbledore nodded just as benignly as before, if with a bit of a worried expression.

“GOOD GOD, MAN! ARE YOU INSANE?”

There was an amused warble from Fawkes, who silenced in mock fright as Harry turned to glare.

“Despite how often people seem to think so, Mr. Collins, I assure you that I am the very picture of mental health.”

“Of the Picasso variety, or the average six year old?”

“It's not like we're exactly thrilled,” Sirius said. “But this is a prime opportunity to catch Lucius Malfoy, at a lot lower of a risk than usual.”

Harry slowly turned to face Sirius, who appeared to be terrified by his expression.

“No offense meant, of course, Collins,” James piped up.

Harry ran his hand down his face in irritation and turned away, deciding to completely ignore the third of the Animagus Marauders.

“So, am I supposed to act like I agree with Malfoy's attempts to turn me into a Death Eater while you all set up some kind of ambush, or just wave 'hi' and Stun him full-stop?”

“While the second would be the simplest, it is more than likely Lucius has a few Portkeys that would take him away if he were to be attacked.”

Harry looked at Dumbledore with an expression of confusion and a shrug. “So I'll set up an anti-Portkey field. I didn't really think it necessary to mention that detail.”

Dumbledore looked at him sternly. “While there is no doubt that your magic is above average, Mr. Collins, setting up such a field is no mean feat.”

Harry's expression turned into irritation. “You're all hopeless! Did you not even bother to learn Dark Magic before considering it evil?”

“That's sort of the point, Collins,” James said. “If we grew up knowing that Dark magic is dark, why would we want to try it and reach that exact same conclusion for ourselves?”

There were very few times that Harry had had to use Occlumency meditation tricks in the course of daily life.

This was one of them.

“Which brings us back to my original complaint. You want me to go meet Lucius Malfoy followed by a shallow-minded and prejudiced, grim, rat, and stag? Really?”

“Yes, Mr. Collins. It would be unwise for you to go into a situation with perhaps more than one highly trained Death Eater by yourself.

“Besides, maybe each of you will learn something new today.”

“I already did,” Harry muttered, heading for the door and followed by a sullen grim, rat, and stag. “Apparently the Death Eaters here are highly trained.”

“Considering you were captured by them and sent here, Collins, I would suggest not mocking their skills too harshly.”

“There were thirty against one, Potter. And I don't recall asking for your commentary.”

There was an impressive and tension-filled silence, one that Harry was very proud of, before Pettigrew and Sirius chimed in together.

“Do you need some ice for that burn, James?”

Harry sighed. Maybe, he thought, he would have a more peaceful and fulfilling life if he just surrendered to Malfoy as soon as he got there.

It was certainly a tempting thought.

((OOOOOOOOO))

There was a room, on the sixth floor of Hogwarts. It was in a corridor normally reserved for the use of guests. It was this room that Harry had claimed, which he kept securely locked. The only weakness to it being the fact that Dumbledore knew the password, not that he could decipher the hissing, or copy it to gain entrance.

In that room was a desk, which had even more spells than the door itself, including Notice-Me-Not Charms, Biting Hexes for anyone who dared touch it, and several Dark security spells that, unless Harry missed his guess, Voldemort didn't even know of, them coming from the same low-class hybrid magic as his wand-creating spell.

Harry planned on keeping countless things in that desk, magical artifacts, as soon as he found them, papers with useful spells, and, most dear to him, the things which no one would even know the existence of, the letters.

The letters he wrote to Luna, with jokes and odd happenings, not least the constant battle between him and Mrs. Norris, with

paragraphs on how much he missed her, and scrawled postscripts with that fact written once more.

The letters he wrote to Hermione, detailing the happenings of how he got to the alternate dimension, the spells he had discovered that he didn't think existed back home, the new potions ingredients he had seen in a daring escapade to raid Snape's office for information, the plant that had caused him and Lupin to become werewolves, and the history of this new place.

Letters to Ron, to Ginny, to Neville, to the Quidditch team, those letters in particular were filled with stern warning about daring to lose a match in the new season. Letters to McGonagall, if she was still alive, to Snape, to Dumbledore, to Hagrid. To the rest of the Weasleys, to Remus and Tonks.

And one long, scathing, crude, and insulting letter to the Dursleys, filled with everything Harry had ever had to swallow so as not to make any situation worse, filled with the criticisms and mocking thoughts he had had, not least Dudley's appearance in that ridiculous Smeltings outfit six years ago. Then he loaded it with all the malicious but essentially harmless jinxes he knew.

Then he set it aside from the other letters, wondering if he'd have the nerve to send it when he got back to his dimension.

But all these letters were growing exponentially. By the time Harry got back home, he wouldn't see anyone for the first few days. They'd all be smothered under the letters he had written them.

Those letters were the most precious thing he owned, in this new place. At first he wondered if it were wise to write out personal thoughts and insecurities where there was a small chance of someone breaking through his spells and getting their hands on them. Then he realized that it was a risk he would have to take, because if he didn't record every new spell, potion ingredient, history mark, or small detail of this new dimension, Hermione would have quite a few words to say about it.

And that was not a risk worth taking.

((OOOOOOOOO))

Harry gazed unconcernedly around the alley, in actuality filled with tension to the brim. There was no sign of anyone near by, and that in itself was suspicious. The silence was oppressive, and Harry had a feeling that something was about to go very, very wrong.

There was a crack behind him, and Harry turned around calmly.

“Malfoy.”

“Collins,” Malfoy returned, looking around the alleyway in such distaste that Harry had to swallow a comment about Malfoy being the one to choose the meeting place. “Have you reached a conclusion about the offer sent to you?”

“Yes,” Harry said in the cold, arrogant tone just used by the Death Eater in front of him. “After giving it a lot of thought, I’ve come to my conclusion. But first, did you know that there’s a stag behind you?”

Rather than foolishly turn around, Malfoy Conjured a small mirror to look behind him. “Why, yes, Collins, I suppose there is.”

Harry punched through the mirror, the force carrying the cracked glass to Malfoy’s face where it shattered and embedded itself in his skin.

Malfoy’s voice was tight with anger as he spoke again. “I suppose that your answer is--”

“Of the go-to-Hell-you-filthy-scum-prepare-to-die variety?” Harry replied. “Yes, pretty much. Except I’m not allowed to kill you.”

“I don’t think you being allowed to would have changed the fact that I would not have died tonight, you blood-traitor.” Malfoy twisted his wand out of his walking stick. “I shall watch you beg for mercy in front of my Lord tonight.”

Harry rolled his eyes, using the opportunity to look to the sides and see all three animals transform. "Did I forget to mention?" Harry asked courteously. "I'm Muggleborn. You filthy scum."

"Crucio!"

Harry barely dodged out of the way, but saw three Stunners aimed at Malfoy. They bounced off a shield, yet Harry knew that Malfoy had cast nothing except for the Cruciatus Curse.

"Sangui Impedimenta!" Malfoy cast at Sirius, who raised a shield and reflected the spell back at Malfoy, where it dissipated against the shield once more.

Malfoy twirled his wand in a circle at all four of them, a white fog coming out of it.

Instantly, Harry, James, Sirius, and Peter were turned into their Animagus forms. Malfoy looked at the stag and rat with an arrogant lack of concern, glanced warily when he saw Sirius's Grim-like form, and froze altogether when he saw Harry as a werewolf.

Then Harry leaped at the stunned wizard, Padfoot just behind him, Prongs circling around so as to charge at Malfoy from behind. Wormtail had leapt onto Sirius's back and was waiting for a chance to jump onto Malfoy, where his rodent teeth could do the most damage.

But the three didn't get a chance as Harry snatched Malfoy's wand in his mouth, and crumbled it against his teeth. The blond wizard seemed shocked and completely incapable of putting up a fight, so Harry simply grabbed Malfoy's left ankle in his mouth and dragged the aristocratic Death Eater along the ground of the alley, making sure to drag him through all the dank puddles and most suspicious piles of rubbish.

"Why you mangy, disgusting little Mudblood!" Malfoy howled in outrage, and Harry paused with his hackles raised, yellow eyes glaring into Malfoy's. Malfoy seemed to realize that he had made a

mistake in insulting the angry werewolf that had a hold on his ankle, and dropped his gaze.

CRACK!

Malfoy hissed in pain at his newly broken ankle, and yelled in pain as Harry, wagging his tail happily, latched onto Malfoy's foot instead, and continued to drag him while putting all the pressure on Malfoy's ankle.

Prongs, Wormtail, and Padfoot all looked at each, then, each wagging their tail, Prongs and Wormtail to the best of their ability, they followed Harry and Malfoy to the end of the alley.

Wormtail quickly leaped on Malfoy, ignoring the disgusted shudder, and sniffed out the three Portkeys hidden along the lining of Malfoy's cloak.

Then, Malfoy still in Harry's grip, the four animals put their paws, or hoof, on Snape's best cauldron, which Dumbledore had smilingly turned into a Portkey, and the five disappeared from the Alley, not a sign that they were ever there except for the broken wand fragments that were soon carried into the wind.

((OOOOOOOOO))

“What I wouldn't give for a bloody big bottle of Listerine,” Harry muttered in a tone of disgust, albeit with a victorious grin.

James laughed, while Sirius looked clueless.

The five wizards had been transported to Dumbledore's office, who immediately Stunned the scruffy, pained, and outraged Death Eater, and cast the counter curse to release the four Animagi from their animal forms.

“I don't believe I want to know,” Dumbledore said, a knowing twinkle in his eye. “Has any immediate damage been done to Mr. Malfoy?”

“Nothing critical,” Harry responded, waving his hand unconcernedly. “His ankle is broken, I smashed a mirror in his face, and Pettigrew will probably be what Malfoy sees when he crosses paths with a Boggart, but he'll live. Since he didn't die of horror after being dragged through an alley, we could all terrorize him without doing any lasting damage.”

“Like lock him in with Moaning Myrtle,” Sirius suggested.

“Or transfigure him into a rat,” James suggested.

Pettigrew made a disgusted face. “Certainly not, perhaps a ferret.”

“What blood type do Purebloods usually have?” Harry asked innocently.

“AB,” Sirius answered, curious as to the unusual question. “They're biologically wired not to be able to share. Sometimes there's As, like me, but I'm pretty sure Malfoy is AB+. Why?”

“I think that we should give him O blood, because Hermione did a research project on how only Muggleborns or Muggles have O blood--it's not like his body would reject it.”

Everyone in the room stared at him.

“What?” Harry asked indignantly. “It'd make him a 'Mudblood', wouldn't it?”

Dumbledore's beard twitched. “I daresay we would have a difficult time of persuading Madam Pomfrey to tell us how to do that.”

“Well, the Hippocratic Oath is about helping people right?” James said a vengeful grin on his face. “Well, changing his blood wouldn't hurt him--”

“--physically--” Peter commented, but also with a vengeful grin.

“--and by giving him O blood he could donate his blood and help a lot of Muggles! Wouldn't that help the most amount of good, with medics are supposed to do?”

“That is the most convoluted rationalization I've ever heard,” Madam Pomfrey's voice said, coming from one of the instruments on Dumbledore's desk.

James gulped.

“But I can't complain, because it's better than killing him and hiding the body, which I would have backed.”

James sighed silently with relief.

“By the way, James, Lily is on the warpath. Something about a tape. And she also said to inform you that you have an hour to get to Hogsmeade before the shops close down.”

“The shops in Hogsmeade?” James repeated slowly, then swore and rocketed out of his chair, scrambling out the door and clattering down the stairs.

Harry raised one eyebrow and copied Dumbledore's earlier statement. “I don't believe I want to know.”

“So, when do we interrogate Malfoy?”

Sirius, Pettigrew and Dumbledore exchanged looks. Then Pettigrew and Dumbledore seemed to nod at each other, and swiveled to look solely at Sirius, who glared back but sighed in defeat.

“We,” he said motioning to the other two, “and the rest of the Order will tonight. But you are not in the Order.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something particularly unfriendly regarding all three of their parentages, when Sirius waved his hands in a conciliatory manner.

“Don't worry, Collins. You can join the plotting Weasley and Potter children to figure a way to break in later tonight. You won't be able to, but you can at least try and keep yourself busy.”

Harry's face looked stormy for a second, before it blanked and he smirked at a panicked-looking Sirius.

“Why, Black! I believe that was a challenge!”

Fawkes twittered in amusement, and Dumbledore sent a betrayed look at the bird.

“Remember, Fawkes,” Dumbledore said authoritatively, and the phoenix looked at him beadily. “You're on the Order's side. Truth, justice, and the side of the Light.”

Fawkes turned to look at Harry.

“I know how to cook salmon .”

And the phoenix flew to Harry's shoulder, who cackled, swept his cloak around him evilly, and vanished in a blaze of fire with Fawkes.

Chapter 17: Ghosts of the Past

A lone Death Eater dashed down the hallway, heading straight for the room of maps where he knew the Dark Lord was creating a map that would show the location of people within a certain area, such as Diagon Alley or the Ministry of Magic.

He burst through the door, knowing the news he was about to deliver was immediate, and, not looking where he was going, slipped on a piece of parchment and went sliding across the floor until he slammed into a book shelf and crumpled to the floor.

The Death Eater hastily stood as he heard a low chuckle behind him.

"As much as I appreciate your zeal, McIntyre, perhaps this study is not the best place to practice your clumsy Gryffindor impression."

"Yes, My Lord," Robin McIntyre said ruefully rubbing the back of his head.

"I presume that you have news important enough to disturb me?" Now there was an edge of steel in Voldemort's voice. Despite the Dark Lord's occasional camaraderie with his followers, he still the leader, and did not have any patience for idle interruptions.

"It's Lucius, My Lord," McIntyre said plainly, knowing hesitation would almost certainly not gain brownie points. "He hasn't come back from that meeting with Collins."

Voldemort's face grew stormy. "None of his Portkeys have been set off?"

"No, My Lord. They were...destroyed."

"You will take Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Nott to investigate the area," the Dark Lord barked. "Do not split up and do not engage in a duel with anyone. Return in less than twenty minutes, with a plausible idea as to Lucius' whereabouts, or do not return at all."

Robin nodded quickly, and left the room.

"McIntyre!"

The Death Eater looked back inside the room. "Yes, My Lord?"

"Perhaps you should pay more attention the next time someone puts a Sliding Hex on your shoes. Finite Incantatem." Voldemort's turned back to his map. "Now go."

"Yes, My Lord," Robin said meekly, and hurried off to find Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Nott, vowing to later find the miscreant who hexed his shoes.

((OOOOOOOO))

One step.

Harry held onto the railing with an iron grip, his feet making slow, tentative movements up each step. His difficulty was compounded by the rollicking staircase, his haste to get off the staircase before Order members started arriving, and, most debilitating of all, the searing headache that mean Voldemort had just received news.

The Dark Lord could hardly be happy about Malfoy's capture, Harry mused, blindly looking for the wall to lean against. He sank against it in relief, trying to bolster his Occlumency shield.

'Or,' he thought with a malicious grin, 'that Malfoy deserted him.'

He methodically thought out a letter of resignation that he would send with Malfoy's forced signature. A few jibes about intelligence, perhaps letting slip that Voldemort was a Half-Blood, particularly letting slip that his real name was Tom Riddle.

'Tom Riddle,' Harry imagined one of the stuffy Purebloods sniffing. 'We followed around some Half-Blood fool named Tom Riddle?' Another indignant sniff. 'Not even Thomas Riddle? Of all the nerve!'

Of course, said stuffy Pureblood would have the name Ignatius McGunty Flibbertygibbit III, or some such.

With all sorts of genetic disorders from being a bit too Pureblooded, Harry further imagine, pleasantly surprised to feel his headache lessening.

'Perhaps,' he thought, as he slowly continued to make his way up the steps, not wanting to open his eyes and have the light blind him further, 'mocking thoughts are therapeutic. It's not laughter at all.'

Then, his eyes popping open involuntarily, Harry's foot sank into the trick step.

He yelped in surprise, slamming his eyes shut as the light pierced his eyes, heading right for the part of his skull that always throbbed whenever Voldemort was in a rage.

He tried to wrench his foot out of the step, only succeeding in making it sink further.

"Damn it all," he grumbled. Even Neville always remembered to jump this step, and he, Harry, had stepped right into it. Now all he needed was for one of the Marauders, or Prewitt brothers, to show up.

Harry tensed as he saw something move out of the corner of his eye.

It was gone as soon as he turned his head to face it, only a faint whispering up from the floor below where it had stirred.

He jerked back around as he heard a clatter from above. Unsure as to what was going on, Harry drew his wand, not trying to make any sudden movements.

Only moving his eyes, Harry surveyed as much of the landing as he could. There were a couple staircases moving about, but none within jumping distance, and he had heard no footsteps for quite a while, not since Fawkes had deposited him in the Entrance Hall, chirped at him merrily, and flown to light on the shoulder of Lily, who had been going out to the grounds.

Starting in surprise, he jabbed his elbows behind him before turning to look. He was sure he had felt something run just behind him, but had heard nothing.

And there was nothing there.

"I'm going insane," Harry muttered to himself. "This is it. The Death Eaters had me for a month, and my mind has simply had a delayed reaction in cracking.

"That's enough!" Harry commanded forcefully, in case anyone was trying to pull something. 'There was only one Justern, right?' "Or I will start to remove vital organs!"

Harry hoped he didn't look as ridiculous as he thought he looked. His feet stuck in the trip step at an awkward angle, with him half-bent and unable to change position, it was highly improbably he could stop anybody from whatever trick they had concocted.

The slowly fading headache was certainly not helping matters.

A high-pitched chittering came from the floor above, but Harry couldn't see anything, even leaning as far back as he dared.

Then an ink pot hit him on the back of the head.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he spun around to eye this new ink pot-wielding enemy, his mouth a thin, angry line, before he paled and, eyes widening, he gaped in shock

"What are you?" Harry finally sputtered indignantly. "A bloody herd of cape buffalo?"

For on the landing below him, on their resplendent, engraved-cover glory, was a veritable army of chittering, legged books.

Wincing, Harry barely dared to look at the landing above, which, surely enough, was also covered with angry books, scuffing and apparently ready to charge.

And Harry knew exactly what they wanted.

He slowly pulled the subdued book out of his pocket, and the watching books all fell still, obviously waiting to see what would happen to their fellow book.

Then, in a moment of idiotic bravado, Harry bared his teeth and clutched the book possessively rather than gently place it on one of the stairs.

"Mine."

And the books charged.

((OOOOOOOOO))

Peter sprinted down a side staircase, rushing towards the Great Wall where the Order meeting would soon take place.

"I can't believe I'm running this late, and the meeting is starting in only twenty minutes!" He muttered to himself. "But, no! I just had to find those wards books that the Prewitts stole. Blasted McGonagall..."

Then he paused, mouth gaping open with his eyes wide.

Was Collins really being attacked by an army of high-pitched books?
On legs?

And did it have to be now?

"Expello!" He watched as Collins sent as many of the books as he could flying, more angry books flooded towards the trapped teen. "Do I need to start setting some of you on fire?"

The threat didn't work, as their unintelligible chittering grew in volume.

"What on Earth did you do to make them mad?" He called, and Harry's eyes flashed with irritation.

"What did I do? I didn't do anything? They're the ones that surrounded me!"

Peter chuckled, ignoring Harry's resulting disgruntled expression. "Are you, by chance reading one of them?"

Harry didn't answer as he grabbed the railing and swung his foot around, scattering most of the near books, which Peter took as an answer of itself.

"Accio book!"

Harry tried to grab the book as it flew away from him, but missed as a particularly large specimen of book kicked the back of his knee. He opened his mouth angrily to demand an explanation for the book Summoning, but paused as the army, stopping to watch Pettigrew claim possession of their small, faded blue fellow, chattered to each other about this new development, then stormed towards Pettigrew.

'Well,' Harry thought with a gleeful smile as the air filled with Peter's protests and spells, 'I can't really complain about that.'

He then frowned at his foot, which was still submerged, now up to the ankle, in the trick step. Deciding there was nothing he could do about it, he turned to watch Pettigrew's progress.

While having slightly more luck than Harry, Pettigrew was still losing the battle. Only the temporary shield he had set up was letting him have any respite. However, the small, blue book, fed up with all the excitement, decided to join in the fun as well.

Starting by biting Pettigrew's fingers as he started to open it.

"Ouch!" Peter exclaimed, trying to shake it off his hand. "What are you, the blasted Monster Book of Monsters? Off! Expello liber ad Collins !"

The book went nowhere, though it did grind its teeth harder onto Pettigrew's fingers in response to being hit by a beam of energy.

Harry looked blankly at the book, and then banged his head against the wall he was leaning on. This...was not good. How could he not have not about specified charms?

But it was too late now. Peter narrowed his eyes at Harry, before apparently deciding to put it aside for the moment.

"Expello liber ad Annoying Sod Leaning Against the Wall Under A False Name!"

Harry cursed. So Pettigrew didn't decided to put it aside for the moment. The book flew towards Harry, thumping anticlimactically to the floor, and, after kicking Harry's shins, ran off. He made to grab it, but, not being able to chase it, didn't have much choice except to let it run away.

The books, now silently smug in their victory, quickly dispersed, running into the shadows and disappearing.

This left Peter and Harry standing there, staring at each, in shock at the literary attack that had just occurred. Then Peter shook it off and glared at Harry.

"So...Collins..."

Harry merely groaned and slid down the wall into a seated expression.

This wouldn't end well.

"Mind telling me who you are? And why you never bothered to tell anyone your real name?"

Harry had a feeling simply saying 'yes' wouldn't make the Animagus go away.

"Can you at least help me get out of this step before interrogating me?"

He closed his eyes and counted to ten during the inevitable laughter that occurred whenever someone fell victim to the step.

"Congratulation, Collins. I didn't think that anyone but first years could forget that step."

"Yes, yes," Harry grumbled. His leg was now knee-deep in the step, and getting a little worried, not even Hogwarts, A History said what happened when someone stayed in a trick step for too long. "A little help?"

Pettigrew obligingly helped pull him out of the step, before immediately turning and pointing his wand at Harry.

"Now, answers."

"Answers to what?" Harry asked blankly, stalling. He was pretty sure he could transform and run for it before Pettigrew could get a spell on him, but that still left Pettigrew with the opportunity to get the Order's help and just make Harry explain later.

And, damn it all, he still didn't have enough experience with Memory Charms.

Peter scowled. "Answers to the question of 'Who are you?' 'Why did you come up with a false name in the first place?' and, most important of all, 'What else have you been hiding?'"

"What makes you think I would ever tell those answers to you?" Harry retorted angrily, reaching for his own wand before pausing, Pettigrew's wand pressed against his throat.

"The fact that, regardless of whatever my other self did in your dimension, I did not. I admit that if I was sent into an alternate dimension and found out that Voldemort was the manager of Dervish and Bangs, I would have some definite issues with letting students go to Hogsmeade until I got used to it. So, get used to it."

Harry's anger deflated, having had those same thoughts circling around his head for a while. "Yeah, I know."

Pettigrew looked surprised. "Really? I didn't think would work, because I've been feeling guilty about it for the last 27 hours."

"Don't expect any pity from me, Pettigrew. As far as I can tell, you're the only overly different one I've met in this universe. Which, as far as I'm concerned, means that something different in the timelines happened, not that you yourself are any different."

Pettigrew's mouth tightened and his eyes filled with a guilty look. "That's besides the point. Who are you?"

"I can't answer that."

"What do you mean, you can't answer that?" The wand dug a little deeper into Harry's throat. "You don't exactly have much of a choice here."

"Fine. I won't answer that."

"What, are you the spawn of Satan?" Pettigrew asked in aggravation. "You're not Muggleborn, you're not a 'Collins', who the Hell are you?"

"Adding the word Hell to your inquiries will not make me answer, Pettigrew."

"Why won't you just answer the question? It's not hard, and I assure you that upcoming questions will be harder."

"I will not answer because everything I do would then be filtered through what my name is, and, I assure you, I've had enough of that."

Harry lashed out, kicking Pettigrew in the stomach, who dropped like a stone. He picked up Pettigrew's wand, holding it in plain sight as he went a down a few of the steps.

Pettigrew sat up and looked at him angrily, but Harry spoke first. "You will not tell anyone your suspicions. I am the one in the prophecy, and

I am the only one who can defeat Voldemort. Which means, quite frankly, that all of you need me more than I need all of you. Got it?"

Peter said nothing, glaring but too dazed to stand up.

"Not too mention," Harry added softly, "that the truth will hurt them more than help them."

Harry didn't say who 'they' were, but backed away down the staircase, throwing Pettigrew's wand behind him and over the stair railing.

Pettigrew gaped. Everything began to fit together now, he was just missing a piece of the puzzle. Collins's shocked reaction upon meeting the Potter, the hatred towards him, Peter, knowing Remus was a werewolf, apparent knowledge of the Potters' betrayal in that other dimension...

There were only a few who could have had parents that fit the parameters of the Prophecy.

Green eyes, black hair, though he couldn't exactly place it...

Come to think of it, that godfather of Collins' had looked an awful lot like Sirius...

Sirius a godfather?

"Good God," Peter breathed, looking at Harry with realization, and the fuzziness that had clouded Peter's ability to recognize Harry's physical features disappeared. "Harry?"

Harry froze, his eyes wide. What? How had Pettigrew managed to figure out his identity? The spell couldn't be breaking, could it?

He groaned and turned around. He had only wanted McGonagall and Snape to know, and only as a safety measure. Now Peter Pettigrew, hated only one step below Voldemort on Harry's list, knew his identity. Now he could only expect yelling and raging, to hear more about this idea that a Potter could never, ever be Dark, and how dare he be so...

He wasn't prepared for Pettigrew to leap forward and smother him in a bear hug.

"Merlin, Harry, I haven't seen you since you started stealing people's watches and trying to eat them! I can't believe you're here! And alive! Wait until Lily and James find out! You actually survived! How on Earth did you? How are they in your dimension? What are Holly and Rose like with a big brother? And why on Earth haven't you said anything? Do you know how happy James and Lily will be, to get to know you? The fuss they'll kick up in celebration..."

Then Pettigrew froze and whacked Harry upside his head, standing back a few paces to glare at him.

"Why haven't you told Lily and James that you're alive?"

Harry looked at Peter in amazed shock, before shaking it off and leveling a glare of his own. "I have my reasons, Pettigrew. I will not inform the Potters of anything until Voldemort is defeated."

Peter looked confused. "What? Why?" But he didn't allow Harry to answer before putting on a mulish expression. "It doesn't matter. I'll tell them."

"No, you won't."

"Don't they deserve to know?" Peter exclaimed angrily. "They had to deal with you dying in this dimension! Shouldn't they get a chance to know you?"

Harry sighed, suddenly tired of everything. "Maybe they deserve to know," he ignored Peter's scoffing repetition of 'maybe,' "but I will not put them in any more danger than they already are!"

"Like they aren't in danger already, full members of the Order and whatnot!"

"But they are not at the top of Voldemort's list," Harry hissed. "And I will not see them put there because of me! I will not have Holly or Rose go through what I've gone through! And I will not allow any

limitations to what I have to do in this war be put in place by parents not wanting to lose a child again!"

Peter deflated, but was still stubborn. "I still don't see what is stopping me from telling them--"

"If common sense and a desire not to be cursed from here to Guam, because I assure you that I will, isn't enough, there's a charm in place. You can't tell anyone who doesn't know until I lift it, which will not be for a very, very long time."

There was a spark of hurt anger in Pettigrew's eyes, and Harry sighed. "It's not that I don't want to know my parents, it's that getting to know them in the middle of a war where I will have to kill the general is not a good idea."

Peter crossed his arms, but conceded the point. "Does anyone else know?"

"Snape and Professor McGonagall."

Peter groaned, though his expression was plotting. "Snape knew before me? I shall have to heckle him, perhaps accuse him of associating with a Potter..."

Then he looked stern. "This is not over. I will bother you until you change your mind, perhaps regale you with Potter stories. And have discussions as to why you must have that penchant for Dark magic."

Harry frowned at that last one. "Don't push it, Pettigrew." Then he smiled. "Though I would like to know some Potter stories."

"Good. Now plot how to interrupt the Order meeting. I have to go to it."

Harry shook his head as Peter ran off. How was it possible that Pettigrew was the one who dealt best with knowing who he was? Harry shrugged, deciding to figure it all out later. It's not as if he ever knew the Pettigrew in his other dimension, not that he would want to.

But for now, he had an Order meeting to spy on.

((OOOOOOOOO))

"Dearest sibling of them all!" Gideon and Fabian exclaimed together, heading towards the small mob of red heads entering the Entrance Hall, identical looks of joy on their faces.

"And have you two been behaving yourselves?" Molly asked sternly, and then looked confused as the two ran past her.

"Arthur!" Gideon cried enthusiastically. "How have you been?"

"Causing mayhem?" Fabian continued.

"Continuing to act for the betterment of Muggle-Magic relations?"

"Making things--"

The brothers shared deeply conspiratorial looks. "--fly?"

Arthur cleared his throat nervously. "Ahem. Well..."

"How's the wife?" Gideon asked, waving his hand over his shoulder at Molly.

"Does she still nag for rooms to be cleaned, and for creepy-crawlies to be removed from the proximity of her kitchen--"

"all the time?" The twins finished together.

Molly glared, and Arthur looked afraid to answer.

Two red heads popped out from behind Arthur, making him look rather relieved.

"It's The Uncles!" Fred and George cried out in mock terror.

"The Nephews!" Fabian and Gideon reciprocated. "Run for your lives!"

Ginny nudged Ron, who was shaking his head at the four causing a scene. "I don't know about you, but I feel rather unrelated right now."

"Don't complain, Ginny," Ron replied. "That's probably a good thing."

"And its The Rest of the Spawn," Gideon said sadly, as if ashamed to claim more relatives than the twins and Arthur.

"I don't know about you, Prongs," Sirius drawled, as the Marauders walked up to the group, "but I think we're about to have some trouble."

The two groups of troublemakers glared balefully at each other. On one side were the Marauders, their wands drawn and evil grins on their faces. On the other, the Prewitt brothers and the Weasley twins, all looking completely relaxed at having wands pointed at them, though their hands had suddenly filled with a multitude of unknown prank gadgets.

Ginny jumped as someone tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned to see an unknown wizard, approximately her own age with black hair, green eyes, and several scars across his face. "Are they always like this?" He asked in an amused tone, and she nodded regretfully.

"Always. We even tried putting them on tranquilizers once. I'm not quite sure what happened, but they all ended up blue."

Harry chuckled. "I'm surprised your mum hasn't blown up at them yet."

"She's given up," Ginny said, elbowing her brother to get his attention. Ron turned and gave Harry a curious glance. "But who are you?"

"I'm no one," Harry said, curious to see how the two would respond with no D.A. Or various dangerous escapades throughout the years. "I'm just trying to infiltrate the Order meeting."

Ron boldly stepped in front of his sister, who, Harry was impressed to see, sent a Shoulder-Tapping Charm at the nearby Professor McGonagall.

"And why are you trying to do that?" Ron demanded, looking at Harry dubiously.

"Because I'm not a member, of course," Harry said, hiding a grin. "Pretty much everyone here has held me at wand-point at one time or another, so I'd rather them not know I was listening in.

"They might think I want to pass information to the Dark Lord or something like that!" Harry finished, adding just the right amount of facetiousness to his tone.

Ron drew his wand, not noticing as McGonagall began to come over, already directing her glare and scowl at Harry.

"Mr. Collins!" Minerva exclaimed. "Can you not stay out of trouble for even a few minutes!" Harry shook his head. "Then you should attempt to do so from now on! What did you do to make Miss Weasley feel the need to alert me?"

"I was testing to see how they would respond to the presence of an unknown!"

Minerva looked skeptical and unimpressed, and then turned to look at Ginny for an explanation.

"I believe he is 'trying to infiltrate the Order meeting,'" Ginny said, looking at Harry with an annoyed expression. "And that everyone at the castle has held him at wand-point."

Minerva couldn't help the grin that quickly flashed across her face. "Unfortunately, very few of us have gotten an actual chance to curse him. Now," she said, glaring at Harry, "behave, and do your best to not interrupt the Order meeting, or I will spend all my energy in assisting Peter to make you slip up. Do we have an understanding?"

Harry sighed. "Loud and clear, Professor."

She nodded, clearly not believing him, before going back to her conversation with Hestia Jones.

"Sorry about that," Harry said to Ron and Ginny, "but I'm abusing my position as Assistant Defense Professor to see how people react. You failed, Ginny, by the way," he said to Ginny, falling into a pattern similar to the D.A.

"And what about my oaf of a brother?" Ginny asked, outraged. "And an explanation as to how you know my name would be nice, please."

"He failed, as well," Harry said, disappointed. "If I had been an enemy, you both would have been dead."

"But I alerted McGonagall!"

"Okay," Harry shrugged. "So at least McGonagall would have found your body."

"But this is Hogwarts!" Ginny rebutted, arms crossed and looking willing to debate it for hours.

Harry laughed. 'Since when has that mattered?'

"I've got a couple stories about that actually. Which means I should introduce myself." Harry stuck his hand out. "Chris Collins, traveler from another dimension."

"Ginny Weasley," she responded, shaking his hand with a grip a little more iron than necessary. "Of this dimension."

"Ron Weasley," Ron said, crossing his arms. "So you know all of us, do you?"

"Yes," Harry responded, watching seven animals wrestle while Remus watched, looking all the world like he had no affiliation with any of them. "I didn't know the twins were Animagi, though. Are they the mongooses or the meerkats?"

"Neither of us have any idea," Ron said, with a put-upon expression that Ginny mirrored. "The Order knows, but the twins haven't ever transformed with us around unless Uncle Fabian and Uncle Gideon do it, too."

"It's obnoxious," Ginny continued. "But Mum won't tell us. She's in on it, too."

"Obnoxious?" Harry repeated wryly. "Fred and George? Never!"

"Ginny!" Holly said happily as she skipped down the stairs, Rose trailing after her. "How's everything?"

"Hi, Holly," Ginny responded. "Fine, though Errol still thinks my bed is the most comfortable spot in the house. How're you?"

Holly shook her head. "My dad forgot my mum's birthday present." She stepped closer to Ron and Ginny, not noticing that Harry was there. "And someone made off with one of the tapes!"

"Oh, great," Ginny groaned. "Do you know who it was? Do you think they knew it was yours?"

"No to both. But we need to hurry and think of how to listen in on today-- Collins!"

Harry looked at Holly, completely unimpressed. "I can't believe you didn't see me."

She narrowed her eyes at him, and then shrugged a small smile on her face. "You want to listen to the Order meeting, too, don't you? It doesn't matter if you overheard, then. You can help!"

"No."

Holly blinked. "You don't want to listen to the Order meeting."

Harry rubbed his forehead, annoyed. "No, I will not help you listen in on the Order meeting." He turned to look at Ginny and Ron. "Any of you."

Holly crossed her arms. "Why not? None of us are allowed in."

"And what would you do with the information?" Harry asked. "Launch your own attacks against the Death Eaters? Try to gather allies for the Order? Or simply be satisfied to have listened in and smugly know what happened?"

"Why not all of them?" Ginny asked, looking at Harry coolly. "Or are we too young, unlike your grand and mature self?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Why does everyone think that I'm older than I am?" He muttered, before answering Ginny. "I don't care about your age. I just don't think you'd be, or that you're prepared to be, useful."

"Geez, Collins," Holly grumbled. "You're cheery today. What's your problem?"

Harry put his hand against his scar, where foreign fury was aching through, along with echoes of several curses, before continuing the familiar gesture by running his hand through his hair in agitation as he remembered that the Ginny and Ron in front of him were not the ones he knew.

"Voldemort is probably not in a good mood after losing one of his top Death Eaters," he answered curtly. "Apart from whatever attacks he might create in revenge, I don't think any of his prisoners are in for a pleasant night."

Holly's eyes widened, and she nodded as she and Rose began to shepherd Ron and Ginny away.

Harry blinked. What he said was true, that Voldemort would probably be taking out his anger on any prisoners (and Death Eaters), and Holly must have thought that he was thinking about his own memories as a prisoner. Shrugging, Harry faded into the shadows, hidden but not seen by any of the Order members, who were all trying, as Remus was, to ignore the animals kicking up a fuss in the middle of the Entrance Hall.

"You appear to be right after all, Severus." Dumbledore's voice broke through the cacophony. "The Order looks more and more like a zoo every time."

The seven animals instantly transformed back to humans, though the general melee made it impossible to see which pair turned into the mongooses, and which turned into meerkats.

Ron and Ginny deflated, hope of figuring it out gone for the moment, while the Order many several expressions, most lacking beliefs as the trouble-makers acted contrite.

"Now, as you all know," Dumbledore continued, "there's going to be a couple of guests at the meeting, who generally act independently-- what was that, Mr. Collins?"

"Me?" Harry asked facetiously. "I'm sorry, did it sound like I said 'hypocrisy?' Just a frog in my throat, really. Please, do continue."

"Ah, my mistake," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "Now, our non-Order members, as well as those not invited," he continued with a glance at Ron, who looked ready to find openings in the wording, "could try to not interrupt the meeting with reports of flooding this time?"

Mrs. Weasley glowered at her children, as Lily did the same. Ron, Ginny, Holly, and Rose pretended to look abashed.

The milling people began to move into the Great Hall and Harry tried to get a glimpse of these 'guests'. However, he couldn't see more than a flash of brown or black hair before the doors slammed shut with stern finality.

Harry grinned. "You wouldn't happen to have any Extendable Ears, would you?"

The four looked confused. "Extendable Ears?"

Harry sighed, the grin falling off his face. "Damn."

((OOOOOOOOO))

"No one knows where his headquarters is except the Dark Lord himself," Snape snapped. "I don't know where it is, and Malfoy doesn't know, even with Veritaserum. So choose another idiotic point to bicker about."

Harry snickered, sitting with his back against the stone wall. It had taken forever to shake off the Weasleys and Holly, who seemed very sure that Harry knew how to listen in. It was only by turning into a werewolf to frighten Ginny and Ron, and sticking Holly and Rose to the walls of a fourth floor corridor, that he had managed to enter the tunnels at all.

Never having had to navigate a way to the Great Hall, Harry had ended up getting a bit lost, but arrived as the Order began discussing what to do with Malfoy. He tried a one-way viewing spell on the wall, which failed, forcing Harry to open the tunnel and hurriedly cast a complicated illusion that could fool Moody's eye. Unfortunately, the illusion left the Great Hall blurry, making Harry rely mostly on voices to identify anyone.

"What's the possibility of offering Malfoy for a trade?" Someone in the back quietly suggested, and Harry scoffed. Apparently that person had never met Voldemort. "Him for one or more of You-Know-Who's prisoners?"

"Yeah, right," Tonks said, her spiky hair a blinding white. "Because You-Know-Who would ever offer up prisoners, or do anything but kill Malfoy for getting captured."

There was murmured agreement from several of the surrounding people. 'Or,' Harry thought to himself. 'You could deliver Malfoy's head to Voldemort on a pike.'

"I still think that we should interrogate Malfoy, then send him to the Ministry," an old man Harry recognized as Dedalus Diggle said. He looked impassively around the room at the sarcastic mutters that followed. "Okay. We should interrogate him, and then kill him."

That got a couple hoots of appreciation from the more bloody-minded of the group, nearly including Harry before he remembered to keep quiet.

"Wait." A figure on the farther side of the room said, standing up. Harry thought the voice sounded fairly familiar, but couldn't remember. Perhaps he was some Ministry employee that rebelled against Crouch. "Why kill him at all?" He ignored the angry muttering at this, though seemed amused at Tonks's angry booing. "After interrogating him, why don't we use that 'Mudblood' idea of yours--" He nodded at the Marauders, and Harry crossed his arms. "Their idea?" "--then send him off back to Voldemort?"

Tonks immediately switched from booing to a standing ovation, during which Remus rolled his eyes and pulled her back into her seat.

Harry muttered with impatience, and tried to fiddle with his spell. The familiarity of the voice was really starting to grate on his nerves.

He rolled his eyes as Moody started to interrogate that last speaker, who was apparently not a member of the Order. Then he shrugged. As long as Moody was busy... He quickly used a simpler spell to turn the illusion clear from his side, one that, while fooling a normal eye, would not stand up to Moody's scrutiny. Of course, the wizard with the familiar voice just had to be facing the other way, didn't he?

"You're that bloke who runs that café, aren't you? Jack Grimsleigh?" Moody asked suspiciously, and Harry furrowed his brow. Grimsleigh? That name didn't sound familiar. Of course, he had hardly memorized the name of every Ministry worker, or, as the case seemed to be, café-owner. "That used to be owned by that girl taken by Death Eaters? Patricia Willis?"

"Williams!" The wizard snapped. "That's why I'm here, actually, to get her back."

Moody scowled dismissively. "So you're one of those people only willing to fight in the war when something happens to you, are you?"

The wizard snarled and turned around. "I'll have you know that--"

Harry gave a low cry of horror and sagged against the wall.

All the Animagus in the room whirled around to look at where the sound had come from, Moody also turning with wand in hand. Magically eye focusing directly on Harry, he cast a spell of his own, melting away the illusion that covered the opening in the wall.

"Collins!" Yelled several aggravated voices, along with a couple cries of "Pest!" and shaken fists. The Marauders and Prewitt brothers started heckling him, looking more amused than anything.

"Mr. Collins," Minerva started, annoyed, "can you not just follow the rules one time..." She trailed off as she saw the expression on his face.

But Harry didn't hear any of them.

He walked numbly out of the tunnels, towards the wizard he just identified, fragments of thought running through his head. 'Impossible ...'

"You're supposed to be dead," Harry said, searching the wizard's face, who looked unnerved for a second before putting a curious expression on his face.

"No, and I don't believe I know you..."

Harry shook his head jerkily. "No! You fell through the Veil. I saw it," he whispered croakily. "Everyone did. How is this possible if you're dead?"

Sirius Black, who had fallen through the Veil at the Ministry, who had found himself in a new dimension just a year ago, gaped. "Harry?" He asked in shock, not noticing that the name came out as 'Chris.' "How-why are you here?" He surveyed Harry closer. "What the Hell happened to you?"

Harry shook his head, still numb with disbelief, and sank slowly onto an empty chair, muttering disjointedly. "No...I killed you...the Veil... impossible."

Then, to the shock of everyone in the Great Hall, Harry buried his head in his hands and wept.

((OOOOOOOOO))

Chapter 18: Worlds Clash

Sirius blinked.

He had not expected this.

He had expected to come to the Order meeting, doing his best to ignore the people of this dimension who he had known well in his own, the ones who haunted his dreams. He had expected to bargain a little with the Order, perhaps share some of the information he knew from his own dimension, in the guise of having overheard it, to get their help in rescuing Patricia.

Well, perhaps goad Snape a little bit, but that was more of a routine than something he actually set out to do.

He had not expected to see his godson, who, by all counts, should have been in his original dimension. Harry, if appearing, should not have been horrified, looking scarred and gaunt and so old. And Harry certainly should not have been blaming himself when he, Sirius, was the one stupid to fall through that damn Veil...

(OoO)

FLASHBACK

Sirius struggled to get out of the Veil, still seeing the fight through a thick haze. Wispy fingers were holding him back, seemingly weak, but he couldn't move back towards the fight, back towards his godson.

"You can't go back through," voices whispered close to his ear. "We won't let you go back through..."

Sirius growled angrily, struggling more against the cold grasp and looking around through the haze to find some sort of weapon or foothold. "You will let me back out. I have to--"

“SIRIUS!” He jerked his head up to see Harry's panicked face, saw him running out of the safe corner where the Longbottom boy was. “SIRIUS!”

“See?” He yelled at the owners of the voices and hands. “I have to go back!”

“No,” they whispered again, some with amusement, some with sorrow. “You entered the Veil, we claim you.”

And Sirius slowly started sliding away from archway, into the gray haze that matched the fingers pulling him back.

“No!” Sirius yelled. “I am going back! Unless you want to be blown up by an angry werewolf and my godson, you will let me back out!”

“Nothing can destroy us,” and the hands tightened their grip on him. “We are as old as Time, and no paltry humans will wreak our destruction...”

Sirius watched the scene in front of him with morbid fascination, still struggling against the force pulling him backwards.

He watched Harry run forward, looking fully prepared to tear down the Veil with his bare hands and pull Sirius out himself.

“No!” Sirius yelled. “Don't touch the Ve--!”

But Lupin ran forward and grabbed Harry backwards. “There's nothing you can do, Harry.”

Harry struggled against the werewolf exactly as Sirius was struggling against the things in the Veil, whispering angrily as his continued attempts to escape. “Get him, save him, he's only just gone through!”

“That's right!” Sirius yelled desperately, panting as his hand slowly forced its way through the haze, towards them. “I'm right here, come on...”

“It's too late, Harry--”

Sirius frowned. “Damn werewolf!” He bellowed. “Use that hearing of yours! If you can't hear me, at least listen to Harry!”

“They can't hear you,” the voices whispered. “You're gone; you're not going back, Sirius Black...”

“Go to hell,” he growled, and felt his fingertips brush up against a side of the archway.

“We can still reach him--” Harry yelled, looking at the Veil with wide, panicked eyes, struggling against Remus's grip, looking fully prepared to bite and kick as necessary if Remus didn't let him go.

“Exactly!” Sirius yelled, looking victoriously at the haze. “See, Harry'll get me back!”

“No, he won't,” a single voice whispered. “We are not here, we are not there, and we're not anywhere. He can't get you. There's nothing he can do...”

Sirius watched with growing horror as Remus repeated the voice. “There's nothing you can do, Harry...nothing...”

Sirius struggled more violently, as Harry looked at the Veil hollowly, sorrow and horror in his eyes, looking nearly ready to believe Remus.

“No...” Sirius whispered, trying to tighten his grip on the stone he felt. “I'm right here, I just need one of you to help...come on...” He struggled harder as Remus also turned to look at the archway, rather than Harry. There was grief in the werewolf's eyes, but no hope.

“I'M RIGHT HERE!” Sirius yelled, watching them accept his death right before him. “I'm not dead, I'm here, I'm almost out... Come on, just help me, I'm nearly out... Don't give up on me just yet...”

“He's gone.”

"I'm not gone!" Sirius yelled, just as Harry shouted the same thing. Harry struggled wildly, looking almost as if he could see Sirius there, just behind the curtain, as if knowing that things were behind it, holding Sirius back.

The haze shifted, voices muttering in rage. "You struggle too much," they whispered. "Maybe if you don't see them, you'll accept the truth faster."

And the haze thickened, darkened, turning back and impenetrable. Sirius gasped at the sudden darkness, which cut off the life line of seeing his godson and Remus, the two people who might have sensed he was there and might have pulled him back.

"SIRIUS!" He heard Harry yell, and Sirius smiled grimly, focusing on hearing that as well as the faint sounds of continuing battle. They hadn't blocked his hearing, and if Sirius could just continue to fight against the haze, could just continue to reach more and more of the stone archway...

The fingers pulled his head back angrily, making everything spin. Clenching his eyes against the sudden panic at losing his sense of direction, Sirius held blindly on to the stone grip.

"SIRIUS!"

He turned his head in the direction of the voice, the dizziness leaving. "Come on, Harry. Keep yelling, just keep talking..."

And he slowly inched forward, ignoring the angry buzzing and violence of the voices.

"He can't come back," Sirius barely heard Remus say, and he rolled his eyes. No doubt the old werewolf had read about the Veil. Luckily, both Sirius and Harry were never the type to accept what books said... "He can't come back," Remus repeated, his voice low and broken. "He can't come back, because he's d--"

There was an ominous pause. Sirius scrambled for the stone, trying to go faster. He had to escape, he just had to get out of this, but it sounded as if Harry was giving up...

“HE IS NOT DEAD!” Harry roared, the sheer volume making Sirius jump. The voices around him whispered amongst themselves nervously, and the haze lightened enough so Sirius could make out the silhouettes. ‘And,’ Sirius thought with a grin, ‘if I’m not mistaken, all the fighting has paused. Damn if Harry can’t yell like his mother...’

But the fighting started up again, and Sirius inched forward, with new hope that Harry had no intention of accepting Sirius as dead.

“SIRIUS!”

Harry struggled wildly against Lupin, eyes seemingly locked on Sirius’s. “Come on,” Harry seemed to be saying, “What the hell is taking so long?”

Sirius felt his fingers brush against the cloth of the veil, just as an impatient expression crossed Harry’s face. “I’m coming!” Sirius yelled, feeling the haze put more effort into pulling him back. “No! I’m--almost--there...”

But Remus dragged Harry back, nearing the edge of the dais, the werewolf’s eyes closed and tears sliding down his face.

Sirius watched, the moment locked as an eternity, seeing the exact moment the hope left Harry’s eyes, the exact moment that Harry’s face closed off and his mouth tightened with rage.

“No!” Sirius yelled in panic, lunging forward against the force as Harry turned away. “I’m right here, don’t look away, and don’t stop yelling!” He felt himself slide backwards a bit. “No no no! Come on, just a little further!” Harry stepped off the dais, turning back one last time to give the Veil a final look of grief, a look of acceptance.

“No!” Sirius howled madly, forcing himself to continue forward, even as he felt himself give up hope. “No! You can’t! Harry! Remus!”

The voices laughed softly, and Sirius felt tears of desperation slip down his face. "No!" He whispered, and his fist closed around the cloth of the Veil, finally a solid grip. "DON'T GIVE UP ON ME! Harry! Remus!"

He watched, horrified that this would be the last scene he would ever see, as Harry faced Neville, and Kingsley ran forward to fight with Bellatrix.

Sirius dragged himself forward, using the grip he had on the veil, not noticing as the haze got lighter. He was almost out, just a little further, he would escape from the Veil.

Then Kingsley shouted, and Bellatrix laughed, before deflecting a spell from Dumbledore.

Oh, how he hated his family...

"Harry, no!" Sirius jerked his head around at Remus's yell, saw Harry's eyes darken and his face twist in the temporary insanity of hatred. He watched as Harry jerked himself out of Remus's loosened grip, and chase after Bellatrix.

"SHE KILLED SIRIUS!" Harry yelled, and Sirius closed his eyes. Harry believed he was dead, and was chasing after Bellatrix to get revenge, instead of running towards the Veil and trying to get him back.

Was hope lost?

"SHE KILLED HIM—I'LL KILL HER!"

Sirius eyes snapped open, and he struggled towards the light with new energy. He was not going to let Bellatrix get a hold of Harry...

He yelled in triumph as his hand broke through the haze, reaching around one side of the stone arch and holding fast.

Then Remus spun around, eyes wide and hopeful.

“Sirius?” He mouthed, and saw the hand.

The werewolf ran forward, knocking a few Order members out of the way.

“That's it!” Sirius said, struggling to get farther and farther out of the haze, grinning maliciously as the haze hissed in rage. “Come on, you mangy werewolf...”

Lucius Malfoy, still evading Dumbledore's spells, looked up and saw Remus running towards the Veil, and saw the hand reaching out, slowly inching forward. His face lighted with a twisted smirk, and he shot a spell at Sirius hand.

Sirius yelled in pain and jerked his hand backwards, realizing too late that the hands had been waiting for him to lose his grip, and began pulling his hungrily backwards, pulling his arms so tight behind him, he couldn't even try to reach the archway again.

Remus whisked the veil back a second too late, and watched in horror as Sirius form quickly slid backwards. Sirius struggled violently forward, enough to make the hands and voices pause, enough to give Remus one last message. “Take care of my godson, Remus, and don't tell him that there was ever any chance of rescuing me.”

Remus nodded, horror and grief filling his expression.

Sirius growled as the fingers started pulling him backwards again. “Moony!” He exclaimed, and Remus looked at him.

“Give them hell for me.”

Remus bared his teeth viciously, and Sirius's world turned black, Remus watching from in front of the Veil until he was gone.

“Good-bye, Padfoot,” Remus whispered, the feeling from nearly fifteen years ago crashing back into him. There was no one left. Just him and Harry, the last of the Marauders, the last of everything.

Sirius was gone.

And Remus had done nothing.

His amber eyes flashed.

That would change.

He reeled around and ran towards Malfoy. The Death Eater looked at him with a sneer, and then paled at the vicious look on Remus's face.

He snarled and punched Malfoy, sending him crashing twenty feet away.

This meant war, and, even if it wasn't now, Malfoy would die, and Remus would kill him.

He would give them all hell.

(OoO)

Darkness.

No, not just darkness; there was a...nothingness. As if he were miles away from anything.

Which was impossible, because, as large as Grimmauld Place was, it wasn't this big.

Wait. What had happened?

Memories flashed through his head. Snape Flooing into the kitchen, yelling about 'that idiot Potter' and the Department of Mysteries.

Bursting into the room with the Veil just as Harry was about to hand over the prophecy.

Dueling with Bellatrix, falling into the Veil, Harry and Remus thinking him dead...

“Alright, you nasty little cretins!” He yelled. “What do you want?”

A dull roar went up at his shouting, quiet whispers hissing angrily at him before stopping abruptly.

Sirius paled. There had to be thousands of them, whatever they were. But what were they waiting for? A grandiose speech? Panicked pleas? Well, they would be waiting for a very long time if that was the case. Sirius Black, as all would agree, could be more stubborn than anyone, even nameless, wispy fingers that whispered.

Then he yelled in pain as he felt something rip into his mind.

Flashes of memories passed. Azkaban, being Sorted, glaring at Kreacher, finding out Remus was a werewolf, having a screaming match with his mother at the age of eight, staring at the business end of Harry's wand in the Shrieking Shack, Transfiguring Snape's head in the middle of the Great Hall, spending yet another night screaming at the Dementors to leave him alone...

Then the thing wrenched out of his mind.

“What the hell was that for?” Sirius raged, trying to find an ounce of light so he could see where he was. “How dare you raid my mind!”

“Sirius Black,” a voice whispered, and Sirius got the impression that the owner was a lot more dangerous than any of the others. “You are not dead.”

Sirius bit his tongue to keep from commenting.

“Nor are you supposed to be here. Why did you enter the Veil?”

“Enter it?” Sirius spluttered. “I didn't enter anything! “

The owner of the voice jabbed his mind. "Ah. Of course, you taunted your fellow human and were pushed in. I see."

Sirius saw red.

"ENOUGH!" He roared. "I'm not supposed to be here, you say? Really? I figured that out already, thanks ever so! You bloody bastards dragged me to wherever the hell this is, decide to play a fun round of meat tenderizer with my mind, and then tell me I'm NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE! If you had asked, I would have gladly informed you that that was the case. "

There was a cool silence tinged with impatience, but Sirius didn't care enough to notice. "NOW MY GODSON THINKS THAT I AM DEAD, and you will return me to the Ministry of Magic. Do you understand me?"

There was nothing, and then whispered laughter surrounded him.

"I almost think it would worth bearing a human presence," the voice whispered, "just to keep you around for amusement."

"Go fuck yourself!" Sirius shouted back, eyes flashing.

"However," the voice continued, "you seem determined, for a human. You will go and wait for your godson then, in whichever domain is chosen for you. However," it continued, and it seemed almost eager, "speak to anyone you knew well before, and all you will get of your godson is a corpse."

The voice faded, with a final command. "Get rid of him."

Many voices rushed forward, and Sirius was thrown backwards. "It will be interesting," the voice said, echoing in his ear, "to see if you can bear the temptation, Sirius Black."

'What the hell--' But Sirius was suddenly thrown out of a Veil, where he hit the stone floor and faded into unconsciousness.

END FLASHBACK

Sirius blinked.

So that's what they meant.

Over a year had passed, in this new dimension.

Sirius had wandered through London for a couple months, in both his human and Animagus form, simply reveling in the freedom of not being chased or hunted.

He had known that Voldemort was alive and well, but, short of stopping any Death Eaters he happened across, he was leery of involving himself in the war. He learned through varying glances and gossip, that James and Lily were still alive.

But Harry was not.

He had cursed those creatures, whatever they were, several times for such cruelty, but something held him back from speaking to anyone he had known before. Maybe it was foolish hope, since Harry certainly was a corpse here, but the voice had said to 'wait' for his godson, so maybe...

Patricia had asked him, once, to explain the reason why he would not go through any arched doorways, or why he suddenly fell quiet at the mention of someone named 'Harry' or the mention of a god child. He had told her, laughing madly through the explanation, though it wasn't at all funny.

It was how he laughed when Peter blew up the street, killing all those Muggles and leaving Sirius to be arrested, the mindless, insane, hopeless, raging laughter.

It was how he was laughing now.

He roared with laughter, no doubt startling all the people in the Great Hall as he held onto his sides. It wasn't funny at all, but rather than helplessness, there was a bit of relief. He had his godson back,

though Harry didn't at all look as if the travel into the new dimension had been pleasant or easy, but life looked much brighter now. He collapsed on the bench across from Harry, still laughing loudly.

He could talk to James now, and Lily, and Remus. Now he could even pester Snape.

He guffawed, having difficulty catching his breath, noticing that Harry started laughing as well. It was a ridiculous reflex, Sirius supposed, but it was either laugh or fall apart.

Sirius and Harry laughed madly, shaking from something that could almost be mirth.

“Snuffles!” Harry gasped out, sides splitting from laughter. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Me?” Sirius chortled, laughter subsiding. “What are you doing here? And what possessed you to get into a fight with a couple of knife-wielding cats?”

Silence fell.

Harry and Sirius looked at each, and then Harry's lips twitched.

They both collapsed into laughter again.

“I told you, Minerva,” Severus said, lip curling. Another Sirius Black...the world was doomed. “I told you that people from Collins's dimension were not normal.”

“I never remember disagreeing with you, Severus,” Minerva replied, knowing exactly what Snape was thinking. “I just expected Collins to be the strangest one, not for his godfather to be.”

Sirius stopped laughing immediately, and leveled a glare at the two of them, as well as the Prewitt brothers who had been chuckling about the professors' conversation.

“Good Merlin,” Gideon said, staring at Sirius. “He can pull off the glare, too!”

“You know what this means?” Fabian asked.

“That McGonagall is also from an alternate dimension?”

“Oh,” Fabian deflated. “I was going to say Molly was, but...”

“I am not the strangest one!” Sirius interrupted indignantly.

“Yes, you are,” Harry argued. “You’re the one who laughs at the worst times.”

“You were laughing, too!”

“You started it!” Harry broke off, and looked at Sirius intently. “How did you get here?”

“The Veil,” Sirius said, grimacing at the memory. “You?”

“Veritaserum.”

Sirius's eyes bugged out.

“Veritaserum?” He croaked. “Did you steal more potion ingredients from Snape?”

“No,” Harry answered, looking shifty. He'd forgotten that Sirius occasionally channeled Mrs. Weasley, and with everything that had changed... “It was Voldemort...”

“WHAT!” Sirius roared, eyes darkening, and everyone in the Great Hall jumped. “And just when did Voldemort have an opportunity to do this?”

Harry gulped, and he could have sworn that the room grew a little colder. He missed Sirius, he really did, but he didn't miss the crazed,

shuttered-eye glare that Sirius must have gotten from Azkaban, the one that Sirius who had used against Dumbledore the night of the Third Task. Rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, Harry stumbled over the explanation.

“Erm... well, you see...the...and Hogsmeade...Luna...definitely had to...”

The glare intensified, and Harry felt reduced to a teenager younger than he actually was.

“ TherewasanattackonHogsmeadewheretheycapturedLunaandlofferedmyselfupastrade!” Harry said quickly, and smiled innocently. Surely no one could have understood that...

“You did what?” Sirius shouted, and marched towards Harry.

“Damn.”

Sirius stood directly in front of Harry, looking him over. That explained a lot, Sirius, beginning to see red. The scars, the wary look Harry didn't have just over a year ago, and the way he held himself was haunted, hunted.

Anger at Voldemort and his Death Eaters boiling, Sirius grabbed Harry in an overbearing hug. They were never catching Harry again.

Ever, prophecy be damned.

Harry tensed at the sudden contact, surprised. He hadn't realized how much he had been avoiding contact with anything, ever since escaping Voldemort. Then he relaxed, feeling much safer then he had in years. Both Sirius and he had a lot of explaining to do, about what had gone on in the last year, and Harry was concerned that, with Sirius's hatred of the Black family, Sirius would resent Harry's use of Dark Magic.

But right now, he was safe, and Sirius was alive, and the Marauders were heckling them.

He narrowed his eyes. The Marauders...

Harry and Sirius pulled out their wands at the exact same time.

“We'll stop!” They cried out hastily. “Don't hurt us!”

The two glared, before grudgingly putting their wands away.

“Merlin,” James breathed, before scowling. “Why does everyone know how to glare except for me?”

“Evolution,” Snape drawled. “It gave every human advanced facial muscles.” He paused. “It just didn't give you the mind power to use them.”

Sirius turned to Harry, ignoring the conversation.

“Come on,” he said, and began walking out of the Great Hall. “We have a lot of catching up to do. Not to mention getting you to realize that it wasn't your fault I fell in that Veil.”

He turned his head and grinned at Harry wickedly.

“As well as who this 'Luna' is.”

Harry groaned, but started smiling.

Sirius was alive.

FLASHBACK

He ran into the café, barely hearing the small bell at the door over the crashing thunder.

The weather fit his mood perfectly: the drenching, hard rain, the lightning crashing a little too close for comfort and the thunder even closer. The air itself felt dismayed and angry.

He slumped down at a small empty table, automatically using a Drying Charm while staring moodily into space.

He had gone to see Harry's grave today, looking at the words engraved into the stone, the finality removing any denial he possessed. The voice in the Veil had tricked him, teased him with a vision of seeing his godson again. Sirius had been foolish to believe it anyway, but a spark of hope had remained, that, though everything in his life had gone to hell, something could go right.

He imagined the gravestones of James and Lily, which had been just a few meters down the row in the other dimension.

They were at least alive here, though they were dead to him. He wouldn't talk to them, because the things in the Veil said that they would be watching. Who knew what they would do if he did talk to them?

Besides, Sirius thought moodily, looking at the window as the last few stragglers in the street ran for cover, what would he have said to them anyway: "Hi, I'm your best friend Sirius Black from another dimension! How are you?"? No, that wouldn't have worked at all.

"Coffee, dear?"

Sirius started, and, with an undignified squawk, fell to the floor.

The woman offering coffee quirked a smile at him, but he didn't smile back.

"Yes, please," he replied, and sat gingerly back in his seat.

"My name's Pat Williams," she continued, setting a mug in front of him, "and if you need anything else, just let me know."

He nodded, and she left, leaving him to brood over the coffee.

He twirled a spoon between his fingers uneasily, trying to think of nothing at all.

He had freedom, now, and anonymity. No one was hunting him, and he could do anything he wanted, everything he had missed out on for fourteen years, since Azkaban and being in hiding.

So why did everything seem so pointless?

He looked at the calendar hanging near the till.

October 31st.

The night that Lily and James died.

The night Harry went off to live with those Muggles.

The night Peter betrayed them.

The night before Sirius ran off and was defeated by the rat, and sent to Azkaban for life.

The night the world went to hell in a hand basket, though most of Wizarding Britain was celebrating their good fortune.

He sighed and looked at the coffee mug moodily, wishing it could have contained something a bit stronger.

What was the point? This meaningless shifting from town to town, which was worth nothing without someone to swap tales with. No one cared if he dropped off the face of the earth.

“Don't do it.”

Sirius blinked, and looked up at the woman who had identified herself as Pat.

“Excuse me?”

“Don't do it,” she repeated, sitting across from him. “You have that Look. You know, the one that says 'There's no point to life anymore,

I'm going to conveniently find a big group of Death Eaters and go down fighting."

"I actually hadn't gone that in-depth," Sirius said, but didn't deny it.

"Too many people are wearing that look, around here. The man you passed on the street, the two girls who came home to see their house on fire with the Dark mark over it," Pat said, staring into space before continuing. "My brother had that look, and he actually went off and did it. Got himself killed, but got considered a hero." She snorted. "Not a hero at all... he was a coward."

She looked intently at him. "You remind me of him, a bit."

Sirius stood up, annoyed. He didn't have the patience to hear someone regale him with war stories. "Ma'am, if I could just pay for my coffee..."

"Sit!" She barked. "I wasn't finished!"

He sat.

"You remind me of him," she repeated, looking him dead in the eye. "His wife and his son died, and he gave up because of that. Now, I don't know what happened to you, but I don't think you look like the type to give up. I don't think you're a coward."

She leaned across the table threateningly. "And I don't like being proven wrong. Am I understood?"

Her face was stern, but her eyes smiled, and Sirius smiled with them. He couldn't give up, not quite yet... "Yes, you are."

"Good." Now she looked uncertain for the first time. "So...who are you?"

Sirius laughed. "My name is Jack, Pat. Jack Grimsleigh."

She nodded. "Nice to meet you, Jack."

Pat pointed at the mug of coffee. "You look rather broke," she said, ignoring Sirius's indignant protests as he searched his pockets for a few Knuts, "so that coffee is on the house with the condition that you come back tomorrow for another one."

"Ma'am--Pat," Sirius protested. "I couldn--"

"Am I understood, Mr. Grimsleigh?"

Sirius smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

She smiled warmly at him, and then looked out the windows. "You should probably get to wherever you're staying before it starts raining again."

Sirius nodded and walked towards the door, saying "See you tomorrow, then," over his shoulder. He ducked at the door and walked slowly down the street, a small smile on his face.

Pat waved, watching his progress down the street. Maybe it was ridiculous, but she felt like she would be seeing a lot more of this Jack Grimsleigh.

END FLASHBACK

"So, where is she now?" Harry asked, leaning back against the couch in the Gryffindor common room. They had schmoozed their way past the Fat Lady with liberal amounts of flirtatious compliments, collapsing onto the overstuffed furniture to talk.

Sirius ran his hand down his face. "Death Eaters," he said shortly. "That's why I was here, actually. I thought that the Order could offer some help, maybe a location of where they might be keeping her prisoner...something."

Harry's eyes had darkened at the mention of Death Eaters, knowing all too well the necessity of rescuing her.

“Don't worry, Sirius,” Harry said. “I'll find out where they're keeping her.”

Sirius looked up at him, alarmed. “You are doing no such thing, Harry James Potter!”

Harry sighed. This is where the conversation got difficult.

“What on earth made you think I would allow such a thing? You just turned seventeen!” Sirius exclaimed, outraged.

“The fact that, whether you sanction it or not, I will do it,” Harry said bluntly, and that stopped Sirius short.

“Harry--”

“No.” Harry cut Sirius off. “I have changed, over the past year. A lot. You need to realize that I will fight Death Eaters, and I will kill them. If I need to torture them for information, I will.”

Sirius gaped at him.

“After you fell through the Veil,” Harry continued, “the war really got started, and it was horrific. In the DA we started learning Dark magic, we learned how to maim and kill. And we all used it. Dumbledore wasn't too happy about that,” Harry remembered. “It took Hermione screaming a storm at him, shrieking about logic and casualties and about how she had had not joined the magical world just to see everyone, including herself, killed by some 'backwards, Dark Ages prejudices.' By the time I was captured, even the first years could see that the carriages didn't move by themselves.”

Sirius closed his mouth.

“So when I tell you that I will find her, I expect you to believe me, and not stop me on account of my age,” Harry finished, not realizing until he stopped that he had started shouting. He tensed, and looked at Sirius warily.

Sirius smiled wanly at Harry. "You aren't supposed to argue with logic," he said softly, and Harry sighed with relief. "I wish you hadn't grown up so fast, though. I wasn't even there..." Sirius frowned pensively. "I was never there..."

"You're here, now," Harry reminded him, "and with excellent timing, actually. I think I was about to go insane, seeing all these people that I half-know..."

Sirius looked at him curiously. "What do you mean, 'half-know?' I'm sure James and Lily have jumped all over themselves telling family stories, and--"

Harry shook his head. "They don't know who I am," he said softly. "I couldn't work up the nerve, and then I kept thinking of reasons not to." He laughed bitterly. "I was an absolute mess when I arrived here," Harry explained. "Defensive, belligerent about my use of Dark magic...still am, as a matter of fact."

Harry shrugged. "They barely tolerate me, and I barely them, when it comes right down to it."

Harry blinked, not having admitted that even to himself.

Sirius looked at him sadly. "I thought you'd say that," he said, and sighed sadly. "I'm a bit relieved, actually. I don't want them to know who I am, either."

Harry gaped. "Why? But aren't they your best friends? I mean--"

Sirius shook his head. "They aren't. They were never tested as the rest of us were, in the other dimension. They never fractured, and there's no place for me among them. I don't think they were forced to grow up as much as Remus and I were..." He shook himself out of it. "So, the name is Jack Grimsleigh. Are you laughing at me? The one who goes by 'Chris Collins,' at least according to the Order's bellowing?"

Harry blanked his face. "Of course not, Sirius...Jack."

Sirius nodded. "Patricia doesn't know me as anyone else, and neither does anyone here except for you. As far as this place is considered, my past never happened. And, for most of it, I like it not remembered."

Harry nodded. "There is one problem, though, S-Jack."

"What?"

The portrait door opened, and before anyone came into view, a blue, glowing shield appeared.

"Harry?" Someone called hesitantly, and, had Sirius been in his dog form, his hackles would have been raised. "Am I about to be attacked?"

Sirius snarled wordlessly.

"And I shall take that as a 'yes.'"

"Damn straight!" Sirius yelled, pulling out his wand.

Harry Summoned the wand out of Sirius's hand. "He didn't do anything here," he reminded Sirius. "Trust me, I have yelled and cursed him enough for something he didn't do."

"You better believe it," Peter grumbled, taking his life into his own hands as he entered the Common Room. "I can still almost feel you biting my head off."

Harry gazed at him impassively. "You deserved it."

"And you started issuing death threats the moment you met me!"

"What's your point?"

"You know," Peter said, watching Sirius cautiously, "I really didn't have one. He's going to try and kill me, isn't he?"

Sirius was still looking at Peter hatefully.

"Maybe," Harry shrugged with a grin. "Now, what did you want?"

"Madam Pomfrey sent me up to find you. She said something about forcing both you and Remus to take care of yourselves, since you obviously can't do it yourself."

Harry groaned, thinking that banging his head against the wall was once again an apt response.

"What is this?" Sirius demanded, crossing his arms, and Harry blanched, not meeting his eyes.

"Nothing."

Sirius swiveled to glare at Peter, who, with a grin, started talking.

"Harry here hadn't really ea--"

"Silencio!" Harry shot, and smirked as the spell hit Peter, who started waving his arms wildly while shouting silent abuse. "Ah, the bliss of silence."

Then Peter charged, and Harry started to run for it, only to be jerked to a halt by Sirius grabbing the back of his shirt.

"You think I'm letting you out of my sight?" Sirius asked incredulously. "Not a chance!"

Harry grinned, knowing full well that he should be protesting, that Sirius was being too overprotective.

But Harry knew that he wasn't going to let Sirius out of his sight any time soon, either, and he hadn't quite realized how much he had missed his godfather until he had him back.

Sirius was here, alive, and, by the looks of things, he wasn't going anywhere.

(OoO)

Chapter 19: Causing Trouble

“You horrible little rat!”

The Great Hall doors crashed open and Peter ran though, taking a screeching turn and hiding next to Lily before shooting a locking spell at the doors, making them slam shut once more.

“I'll get my revenge if it's the last thing I do, and don't think I won't remember this!”

“Dimensional travelers,” Peter said airily with a shake of his hand, as his eyes stayed glued worriedly to the doors. “They're all irrational, really.”

There was a loud bang, as if someone had thrown himself against the door, which a low muttered curse proved.

“You can't hide forever, you miserable--Ah ha! Roperti!”

The doors oozed open, almost unwillingly, making Harry look at them warily before swiveling around to glare at Peter beadily.

“Death,” he hissed with narrowed eyes, and Dumbledore stood up in alarm.

“Now, Mr. Collins, there's no need for--”

He was interrupted as Sirius barreled through the doorway.

“Chris!” He exclaimed, skidding slightly looking at his godson suspiciously. “You didn't steal Madam Pomfrey's Cheering Potion stash again, did you?”

“What!” Harry squawked indignantly. “I had nothing to do with that! That was Ron, trying to get Hermione to calm down about the O.W.L.s... Hang on, how did you know about that?”

“Snape,” Sirius said simply, as if that explained everything.

It did.

“Well, the greasy git blamed me for everything, no offense,” he said, glancing at the scowling Snape. “And it has nothing to do with that.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes at Harry, vague suspicions running through his mind until one solidified.

“You escaped from the Hospital Wing,” he guessed, and Harry darted his eyes to the side guiltily.

“Well, kind of...” Harry thought about what would happen if Sirius knew the whole of that story. Merlin knew that Sirius could be worse than Mrs. Weasley when it came down to it. “Close enough, actually. So, that's the end of that story.”

He looked around for a distraction, and decided that food was the best. “Ah, pudding! Lovely,” he said, settling himself into a spot where he could throw glares at Pettigrew without obstacle.

“And what does R—Lupin have to do with it?” Sirius followed Harry, firing questions like a dog with a bone. “And what was the comment of you not taking care of yourself about? Pomfrey generally has a reason for being overbearing...”

“I plead the fifth,” Harry said, sinking lower and lower into his seat, wondering if it would be worth the counterattack to throw a glob of pudding at his godfather. “Now, can you drop this?”

“I will not drop it,” Sirius said, looking offended at the very thought. “You're looking at the wizard who spent thirteen years thinking of little but revenge. If that's not unwillingness to let things go, then I don't know what is!”

“Fine,” Harry said shortly, hoping this conversation didn't lead to other occasions. “There was this plant, which we still don't know how it got here,” he said questioningly, raising an eyebrow at Dumbledore who shook his head, “that turned Lupin over there into a werewolf

when it wasn't full moon. Then it infected both of us, and we got stuck in the Hospital Wing."

Sirius blinked, and then turned to the Great Hall at large.

"Does anyone else want to explain what happened?"

"It happened pretty much as Collins said," Peter responded with a nod towards Harry, before the rat Animagus grinned evilly.

"Except he forgot the part where he turned into a werewolf, and was chased by Remus because he was holding the plant. Oh, wait, that's not all of it," Peter assured Sirius, who had frozen in shock when Pettigrew said, 'turned into a werewolf'. "Then there's the debacle where Collins started screaming bloody murder because the plant had unknown side-effects..."

"Both Remus and Collins were locked in the Hospital Wing for a bit after that, and Snape took his time making the proper antidote."

Snape took this time to smirk triumphantly.

"Of course," James added his two cents, "the both of them wouldn't have been affected so badly if they had actually been eating."

As if to punctuate that statement, Tonks knocked lightly on the table, making a bowl of stew appear, and she pushed it towards Remus sternly, who took it with a melancholy expression of compliance.

Sirius eyed Pettigrew dubiously, evidently deciding to believe him before rounding on Harry.

And staring stonily, eyes dark.

Harry raised one eyebrow at the look his godfather was giving him, matching it glint for glint. 'If he thinks the evil eye is going to do anything after being taught by Snape for six years...'

...Harry shifted guiltily as Sirius did nothing but watch him reproachfully.

“What?” He finally asked impatiently, not being able to stand it.

“Ignoring the whole 'not taking care of yourself' issue,” Sirius said in a tone that stated plainly it was not forgotten, “you were turned into a werewolf in the past year?”

Harry shook his head. “No, not really.”

“Not really,” Sirius repeated dryly. “Were you Transfigured into a werewolf at some point, then, because no one can be a--”

“A werewolf Animagus?” Harry asked cheekily, before sighing. “It was actually a stupid Slytherin plot,” Snape adopted an offended expression at that, “that did it. Perhaps not so idiotic, though, since it normally would have worked...”

Sirius cleared his throat impatiently.

“What exactly was this idiotic Slytherin plot?” Sirius asked, smirking as the phrase once more gathered a hateful look from the Potions Master.

Harry shrugged. “They put Wolfsbane in the Animagus potion.”

“THEY DID WHAT?”

Harry waved the yell aside airily. “It was no big deal really. It didn't even mess up the composition of the Animagus potion.”

“But it kills any non-werewolf who drinks it!”

Harry smirked. “Prophecies occasionally have their uses. It just...incapacitated me for a few days.”

Sirius groaned and buried his hands in his arms. "Why me?" He groaned. "Why am I the godfather of a masochistic, idiotic Gryffindor?"

"I am not masochistic!" Harry said indignantly. "And speaking of idiotic," Harry added, verbally jabbing the surrounding listeners, "who was the one who thought the Order could help him?"

There was an immediate indignant uproar, punctuated by someone hexing the nearby dish of pudding to splash fully onto Harry.

"Alright, you imbecilic little Phoenix minions!" Harry stood, pulling out his wand, and silence fell. "Who hit the pudding?"

The Mauraders looked at their red-headed counterparts, who looked back at them.

They pointed at McGonagall.

The Transfiguration professor crossed her arms and looked at Harry defiantly. "Something you want to do about that, Collins?"

Harry glared as he subtly quirked his finger, making a bowl of goopy Brussels sprouts rise and drift slowly towards the witch's head. Then he gave an evil grin as the bowl upended itself, landing over McGonagall's eyes.

"You little cretin!" She shrieked, reaching for her wand.

"And it is my pleasure to announce," Fabian said in an announcer-like voice.

"--The one and only Order-sponsored--" Gideon continued.

"--food fight!" Fred and George chimed in, glaring at Snape with vicious grins.

Most of the Order members did not look willing to join the battle that was sprouting in the section of more immature members, making Sirius sigh with impatience and make food fly at every member.

“Quick,” he yelled to Harry over the noise, “let's go while they're all distracted. Where is that tunnel you hiding in earlier?”

“I was not hiding. I was eavesdropping,” Harry responded before looking at Sirius suspiciously, “and where exactly are we going?”

“Dumbledore's office.”

Harry looked at Sirius in confusion before his eyes widened and he shook his head, nonetheless waving his wand and creating several annoying spells to add to the confusion of the culinary battle. “You're insane, Jack. There's no way in hell we can get away with this...”

(OoO)

“We're going to get caught, you know,” Harry hissed as he ducked into the shadows. “And this is absolutely ridiculous.”

“We're are not going to get caught,” Sirius whispered back, looking affronted as he peeked over the top of a statue. “Especially with those tunnels of yours, this is fool-proof! We've both sneaked through Hogwarts plenty of times. Just because we've never tried to sneak into Dumbledore's office...”

“That's the ridiculous part!” Sirius made to dart ahead, but Harry pulled him back. “We're sneaking into the office of the man who knows more about magic than anyone else alive, us, the two people probably least trusted in the castle. Except for the twins,” he paused, “but that's besides the point! What makes you think we can get in?”

Sirius waved his hand dismissively, without clarifying which point he found negligible.

“Of course we can get in. Even if Fawkes won't help, and he seems to tolerate you, so he might, we both have tons of practice at getting into places we probably shouldn't. Where's your sense of adventure?”

Sirius darted off to the nearest suit of armor.

“My sense of adventure is keeping your common sense company,” Harry muttered, but he tapped the top of his head with his wand and Disillusioned himself before creeping towards Sirius. “If we're going to pull this off, we at least need to do it properly,” before rapping Sirius over the head as well.

“Are you sure that Malfoy is in Dumbledore's office?” Harry asked, and Sirius looked at him balefully.

“Of course I'm sure, Harry! You'd think that I would go to all this trouble on a guess?” There was a pause.

“Okay, I'm pretty sure that Dumbledore would keep him there. Where else could Malfoy be?”

“Oh, I don't know...,” Harry said sarcastically, ticking points off his fingers, “the dungeons, you know, where people typically keep prisoners, any spare classrooms, thrown off the edge of the Astronomy Tower with only a rope tied to his feet so he's swinging in the breeze, under the guard of house-elves, under the guard of Moody--”

“I get it!” Sirius muttered back. “So, maybe he's not in Dumbledore's office. Where do you think he is, then?”

“I think he's in Dumbledore's office--” Sirius threw up his hands in frustration at Harry's answer. “It would just be nice to know for certain.”

“As godfather, it is my solemn duty to inform that nothing in life is certain and that we all must take part in the Great Gamble of Existence--”

“Meow.”

The two tensed, and shared a look.

“Meow.”

“It's the creature from the beyond,” Sirius said with a revolted look. “How has that damned cat survived this long?”

“Karma,” Harry suggested, casting Petrificus Totalus on Mrs. Norris and shrugging. “Though that raises the question of what chaos we caused in our past lives to be stuck in this situation.”

“Simple,” Sirius answered as he turned the cat a startling yellow. “I was a mass murderer. I'm not quite sure what you were... Maybe a cat burglar?”

“A cat burglar,” Harry repeated indignantly. ‘Oh, yes, as I hypnotize cats within dwellings to open the door so I can just fly right in...’ He briefly pondered the merits of trying that to steal Fudge's infernal bowler hat, but quickly decided that it wasn't worth the effort, especially when Fudge wasn't much of a worry here, anyway. ‘Besides,’ he reasoned, ‘any cat living with Fudge has enough problems without me making it an accessory to a crime.’

Sirius shrugged with a pitying expression. “Not all of us can have such titles as ‘mass murderer.’ Some poor sods even get stuck with ‘Boy-Who-Lived’.”

Harry twitched.

“Anyway,” Sirius hurriedly continued, “what are we going to do with the cat?”

“Leave her?”

“Oh, yes, Harry, let's leave the bright yellow, frozen Mrs. Norris here for Filch to find.”

“You asked!”

“Well, I was hoping for a helpful suggestion!”

“Shouldn't we be concentrating on breaking into Dumbledore's office?”

“The cat is a witness! We have to make sure she won't talk!”

Harry ran a hand down his face in aggravation. “Sirius, she's a cat.”

“But she has that psychic link to Filch,” Sirius pointed out. “And we certainly can't chance him finding us.”

Harry looked around helplessly. “We're in the middle of a long, bare corridor. No curtains, no nooks, no secret little compartments. Unless you want to stuff her inside a suit of armor--which we won't be doing.” Sirius's face fell. “You're joking, right? Hermione would somehow know and send this dimension's Hermione to kill me!”

“Fine,” Sirius sighed. “Should we Disillusion her, then?”

“That works for me.” He shook his head as the cat faded from sight. “Now, that that's over with, we probably should be leaving.”

They continued their trek towards Dumbledore's office, coming to a halt before the gargoyle.

There was a long pause, and then Harry spoke. “Now what?”

“Now...I guess we start listing candy names. Haven't you heard his password lately?”

“No. He was changing it when I last left his office. Something about not trusting me to not kill Malfoy.”

“Dumbledore wouldn't really think--”

“No,” Harry interrupted, “I assure you. I would probably kill him.”

Sirius stared at Harry, who looked coldly back. “Fair enough,” he said slowly, “but you really do need to tell me what happened over the past year.”

Harry nodded. That would no doubt be a conversation that required a room bare of any breakable objects. Though, he recalled, breaking those devices in Dumbledore's office could be considered therapeutic...

“Lemon drops?” Sirius tried hesitantly.

“That one was just used,” Harry said ponderingly. “And I don't know many magical candy types...”

“That's because you've had a deprived childhood,” Sirius said back, not seeing Harry's eyes darken in response. “Let's see...”

Sirius rattled off a long list of names, kicking the gargoyle as none of them worked.

“Do you know any Muggle candy names?” Sirius asked Harry, looking down both sides of the corridor to make sure no one was coming.

“Erm...oh!” Harry exclaimed. “The--no, the--blast, you know, the thingamajigs...the--”

“Thingamajigs,” Sirius raised one eyebrow. “You've got to be kidding me.”

Harry gave Sirius a cross look. “They're not called thingamajigs. I just can't remember! You know, the, the whatchamacallits, the--”

The gargoyle jumped aside, revealing the spiral staircase.

Sirius snapped his fingers. “You mean the Whatchamacallits? Why didn't you just say so?”

Harry muttered to himself and started walking up the staircase. Sirius paused to quickly examine the gargoyle, before casting a navy spell at its feet and following after Harry.

He caught up to see his godson rifling through the papers on Dumbledore's desk.

"Harry?" He said, seemingly aghast. "Petty thievery? For shame! I thought you knew better!"

Harry merely waved a stack of parchment that was clutched in his hand. "I'm just making sure there's nothing useful. He probably has everything important down in the Great Hall from the Order meeting." Harry paused, and then looked at Sirius guiltily. "I really hope that that spell didn't destroy anything important..."

"Don't worry, Dumbledore always adds spiffy little spells to all the paperwork for the Order. It was quite aggravating when James and I were trying to turn everything at an Order meeting purple, only for the parchment to stay all parchment-colored."

"Spiffy little spells?" Harry repeated incredulously, and then added sarcastically. "No one would ever have guessed you were a child of the sixties, Sirius."

Sirius nudged open a door and walked in, wand first. "There was nothing wrong with the sixties!" He pointed his wand at Harry. "And the name is Jack."

"Sorry," Harry apologized. "It's still a habit." He joined Sirius in searching the doors along the walls of Dumbledore's office. "I'm surprised we haven't been caught yet, actually."

"We haven't been caught because the distraction is fool-proof," Sirius said with certainty. "And because we have a perfectly good reason to interrogate Malfoy. If we had just wanted to bother him, then we probably would have been caught."

Sirius nudged open another door, feeling adrenaline pumping in his veins. They'd soon find Malfoy, who would certainly know where Voldemort kept all the prisoners. And Patricia just had to still be alive. He would have somehow known if she wasn't...

"Harry!" He hissed, as the door swung open to reveal a small room with no windows, just a hollow light glowing from the ceiling to reveal Lucius Malfoy, Stunned with his arms tied to a chair. "I found him! And we'd better hurry, just in case there were--"

Harry rushed forward, wand waving as he went. "Two wards. One for the door, and one on Malfoy, for if he wakes up. Dumbledore will know someone's up here. The second one doesn't matter. Ennervate!"

Lucius stirred, before becoming alert with a sneer on his face.

"Collins," he said contemptuously. "Decided to side with the blood traitors, have you? I'm sure my Lord will have a special death planned for you."

"Yes, yes," Harry said, annoyed. "A special death, as always. And I'm Muggleborn, by the way, so I hardly would have joined you." He ignored Malfoy's outraged expression. "I can't believe you and your fellow minions just took my word for it..."

He pointed his wand at the blond aristocrat. "Now we have a couple questions to ask you, and, keep in mind that neither of us like you too much--" Malfoy looked disgustedly at Sirius, who returned the look ten-fold, "so it would be in your best interests to answer truthfully, and quickly. Got it?"

Malfoy sneered.

"I have no doubt that you're on the side of that Muggle-lover Dumbledore. I can hardly see him authorizing any brutal questioning. A paltry attempt, Collins."

“Who says we're up here with Dumbledore's authorization?” Sirius growled, tapping his wand on the palm of his hand. “And you will answer. Where does Voldemort keep his prisoners?”

“You do not have the right to even speak his name, you filthy--”

Harry cast a slow-working compression hex at Malfoy's chest, who immediately took a deep breath.

“I'm not taking that off until you answer,” Harry said viciously, “and I've seen the effects before on someone who wouldn't answer a question. Where does Voldemort keep his prisoners?”

Malfoy imperiously raised one eyebrow. “You expect me to speak under a mere Compression Charm, Collins?” He said thinly, taking another breath with more difficulty. “I never took you for the naive type...”

Sirius snarled hurled a bone-breaking curse at Malfoy's hand, which shattered several of the tiny bones.

Lucius paled in pain, but said nothing. Harry hissed in irritation. Sure, standing up under interrogation was admirable and all, but they were in a bit of a hurry.

“I can always bite him and see if that would turn him into a werewolf,” Harry suggested coldly.

Sirius shook his head. “The effects would take too long, and we're not sure if it would work anyway. Do you have any truth potions?”

“Dumbledore should,” Harry said and rushed back into Dumbledore's office.

“Looking around quickly, Harry didn't see any potions, nor any place where they would be stored. They could be behind one of the doors, but it would take too long to check...”

Harry Conjured a glass bottle and filled with a mixture of a numbing and mild pain potion, which would mimic the effects of resisting any strong truth potion. He tossed it to Sirius, and mouthed 'Placebo.'

Sirius nodded jerkily and cast 'Petrificus Totalus' on Malfoy, forcing the potion down Malfoy's throat.

Harry tensed as, just as he was about to reenter the room, he heard footsteps coming up the spiral staircase. He quickly turned into a werewolf and sniffed. Dumbledore, definitely, with McGonagall and Moody. He turned back into a human.

Wonderful.

"We've got company," Harry hissed, and heard Sirius's answering curse. He ran to the door and put up as many locking charms as he knew, several frowned upon or completely unheard of.

Hearing exclamations on the other side of the door, along with counter-charms that were being said much more quickly than he would have liked, Harry looked around wildly for inspiration. He didn't know what any of the little contraptions in Dumbledore's office could do, and was leery of touching anything that might have unexpected properties. He caught sight of a hurriedly stacked pile of books in a corner.

"One can never have enough socks. Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn't get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books."

Grinning at the memory, Harry conjured a sock, which unraveled itself, wrapping its yarn around the doorknob. Harry took half of the loose loop and stuck it to the nearby wall with a Permanent Sticking Charm, then waved his wand and layered the door hinges with thick rust.

He ran back to Sirius and Malfoy. "Anything?" He asked. "Dumbledore, McGonagall and Moody are trying to get in the office, but it should take them a while."

“Nothing,” Sirius said angrily, glaring hatefully at Malfoy, who was as cool and condescending as ever. Harry put away his wand and smiled coldly at Malfoy.

Harry yanked Malfoy out of the chair, ignoring Malfoy's cry of pain as the ropes squashed his hands before releasing their grip on him. He swung Malfoy around and threw him at the nearby wall, holding him pinned by the throat, which, considering Malfoy and was much taller than Harry and Harry did not have his wand out, seemed to unnerve the Death Eater.

'Why is it,' Harry wondered distractedly, 'that I'm always pinning Death Eaters by their throats in this dimension?'

“You will tell me,” Harry said in a deadly tone, “where the prisoners of the Dark Lord are kept, in particular Patricia Williams. You will tell me,” Harry tightened his grip around Malfoy's neck, his green eyes boring hatefully into gray ones, “now.” Harry's eyes flashed red, and Malfoy recoiled.

“Riddle Manor,” he croaked, gasping for air. “Not that you--can rescue them--”

Harry dropped Malfoy wordlessly to the ground, and turned to look at Sirius. “I guess we're going to Riddle Manor, then,” Harry said pleasantly, as Malfoy coughed and sat up.

“ Apparently,” Sirius responded, taking Harry's method of questioning Malfoy in stride. “Now what?”

Malfoy laughed, and Harry turned, one eyebrow raised coolly. “Something to add, Malfoy?”

“You have a connection to the Dark Lord,” Malfoy said consideringly. “You're lucky to have survived this long, though I suspect that won't last much longer.”

“Was that it, Malfoy?” Harry drawled. “Because that wasn't particularly earth-shattering, there, as cryptic messages to deadly foes tend to go.”

Malfoy looked at Harry, eyes blazing with hatred. “My Lord will kill you for your connection to him, but there is an interesting question...What will Muggle-Lovers and the Ministry do to you for it?”

“No doubt ask for a rather lengthy explanation,” came a voice from the door, and all three turned to see Dumbledore standing there, with McGonagall and Moody standing behind him.

None of the three looked very pleased to see Harry or Sirius there.

“As long as we're looking for explanations,” Dumbledore continued, “Perhaps one for breaking into my office and interrogating a prisoner is in order?”

“Perhaps you can explain to me,” Malfoy drawled, “why two of your apparent Order members are so proficient in interrogation techniques. I wouldn't have thought you to allow Compression Hexes or Bone-Breaking Curses.”

“Slimy git,” Harry muttered as McGonagall glared at him in disappointment and disgust.

“I know,” Sirius muttered back. “He's always on his high horse, complaining and making himself out to be the victim. Complaining about a broken bone, saying he was under the Imperius Curse, back in sixth year with the fish...”

“Sixth year with the fish?” Harry asked incredulously. “What on Earth did you do that had to do with fish?”

Sirius crossed his arms. “I had nothing to do with that.”

“Ri-ight.”

“Silence!” Dumbledore thundered, eyes blazing at the two of them.

Harry's mouth closed with a click of teeth a second later, eyes wide. Despite all provocation throughout the years, Harry had never heard Dumbledore shout at anyone except a Death Eater, and even that was a rarity.

Harry had had a lot of experience with professors, and various other adults, yelling at him throughout his life, and could usually judge how much trouble he was in by the volume. With McGonagall, the louder she got, the more points taken. If she stayed at a normal volume for a rather large offense, that meant detention.

With Snape, Harry was always in trouble anyway, but knew the quieter the Potions Master became, the closer Harry came to death. Hagrid's voice always boomed, but Harry never really got in trouble with him anyway, so Harry didn't have much of a scale there. Professor Flitwick didn't yell either, and, except for a few very unlucky students, never assigned any punishments.

Sprout shrieked and gave detentions in protection of her plants, but generally didn't care what the students did to each other, unless one of her Hufflepuffs were involved, at which she calmly got to the bottom of things.

Again, Harry didn't have much experience there.

Of course, he didn't have much experience at Dumbledore yelling at him, either, but it was pretty much assured around the Gryffindor Common Room, as more students from that House were sent to Dumbledore's office than any other, that if you did cause such a reaction, that you became infamous for inciting a new scale point added to the Richter scale.

It was rumored that the Weasley twins had come close, but none of Harry's friends ever believed that. Hermione in particular was certain that Harry would be the legendary one to do so.

'And,' Harry thought with a wince, 'Hermione is never wrong...'

“Minerva,” Dumbledore said calmly, “could you please patch up Mr. Malfoy?”

The witch nodded, and, stepping past Harry and Sirius with an icy glare, started healing the Death Eater, who was making vaguely snooty comments in return.

“Mr. Collins, Mr. Grimsleigh,” Dumbledore continued, just as calmly, “come with me.”

He began walking back down the spiral staircase, Harry and Sirius following meekly with Moody trailing behind and watching them suspiciously.

“I told you we were going to get caught,” Harry muttered to Sirius.

“Shut it, Chris,” Sirius muttered back, before grinning. “It was a success, wasn't it? We now know where Patricia is, and we got to hex Malfoy.”

“True,” Harry conceded. “All in all a good day's work. Now we just have to survive the Order.”

“The Order?” Sirius scoffed quietly with bravado. “Ha!”

Then he went quiet. “Molly and Lily are there, still, aren't they?”

“Probably,” Harry replied. “And I've never been more glad that you're my guardian, let me tell you, because that means they'll go for you first...”

Sirius squawked indignantly, making Dumbledore look back at them with a raised eyebrow. Sirius subsided until the Headmaster turned back around.

“What is that supposed to mean?” He hissed at Harry. “What happened to 'You're alive!' and 'I can't believe it!' and all that? Now you're offering me up to the wolves?”

Harry pondered that for a moment, amusement written all over both his and Sirius's faces. "...Yes. Yes, I am."

Sirius barked with laughter. "You are definitely your father's son."

(OoO)

All talking stopped in the Great Hall as the doors slammed open to admit Dumbledore, who walked briskly with his eyes blazing.

"Albus!" Lily exclaimed, looking worried as she cast the final few charms to Vanish the chattering clouds of confetti and shredded cheese nearby. "Were those the alarms for Malfoy's--"

She stopped and looked between Dumbledore, who was beginning to pace angrily, to Sirius and Harry, who shared a guilty look upon entering the Great Hall and stayed far, far away from Dumbledore. Moody entered after them and swung the doors shut again, watching the two black-haired wizards with more suspicion than usual.

"Oh," Lily breathed, reaching the most logical conclusion. "Oh, no... They didn't..."

Dumbledore spun around, blue eyes piercing Sirius and Harry. "What were you two thinking?" He shouted, and uneasiness permeated the room.

The two shared a glance, looked at Dumbledore, then pointed at each other.

"Peer pressure!" Sirius exclaimed.

"Familial obligation!" Harry declared, and then turned to Sirius. "I'm twenty years younger than you!"

"Mental age."

"Fair enough."

“Enough!”

The two subsided.

“Mr. Grimsleigh, I fully understand that someone you care deeply about was captured by Death Eaters. However, I assure you, this does not mean you can run pell-mell over laws and regulations.”

“Says the leader of a vigilante group,” Harry muttered.

“Correct, Mr. Collins! Say the leader of the vigilante group which has taken prisoner custody over Lucius Malfoy.”

“Who I captured,” Harry commented quietly.

“Mr. Collins, you will desist in your unhelpful commentary now,” Dumbledore commanded, and Harry scowled. “The two of you attacked -- no, tortured – Mr. Malfoy when he was defenseless.”

“Torture?” Harry said indignantly. “Torture? That was not torture--”

“I can't help but agree with Collins, there, Albus,” Alastor growled. “I've told you before that simply Stunning Death Eaters does nothing. If one has information, then sometimes the benefits--”

The doors burst open again and McGonagall stormed through. She gave Harry a scathing glare, sniffed contemptuously at Sirius, and marched to take a seat near the Potters. “I did not expect you, of all people, Collins, to resort to the methods of your Death Eater captors. One would think that you had enough experience to not exact the same thing on another.”

Harry snarled. “You will not go there, Professor. I swear to Merlin--”

“Why shouldn't I?” She shrieked angrily, cheeks turning red. “Given, it was Lucius Malfoy, but there are standards of the Light to be kept! Even in war, and--”

“I'M NOT BLOODY LIGHT!” Harry yelled. “Will you all just drop it already? Oh, yes, bad, horrible us. How dare we,” he pointed to Sirius and himself, “actually get some useful information? We get it! No more interrogating Death Eaters, especially if doing so might save others! Nope, we must hold up idiotic standards, in order to make ourselves feel better when people die from inaction! A brilliant plan! Really!”

“Damn,” Sirius said, “you'd think that in a different dimension, the Order would be different, too...”

Everyone in the Great Hall began yelling back at them, refuting the accusations of uselessness, as well as hurling insults.

“Jack?”

“Yeah, Chris?”

“Welcome to Hogwarts. A truly delightful place, it is.”

“No comment.”

Dumbledore shot sparks into the air, which sputtered and popped loudly.

“Did you discover the location of your Miss Williams?” Dumbledore asked, and Harry fielded this one to Sirius, too busy giving the evil eye to McGonagall.

“Yes,” Sirius said with certainty, before pausing. “Well, the name of it at least.”

“I know where it is,” Harry said muttered to himself.

“Riddle Mansion,” Sirius finished, and saw incomprehension flicker onto several faces.

“I haven't heard of any Riddle Mansion,” James commented, and Harry chuckled.

“No, you probably wouldn't,” he replied with a wry grin. “Since it belonged to a Muggle family.”

There was a disbelieving silence, before Black snickered. Tonks followed shortly after, succumbing to incredulous laughter.

“Well, that decides it,” Frank Longbottom proclaimed. “Lucius Malfoy is insane. No information from him will do us any good.”

“Quite to the contrary,” Dumbledore hummed, his customary front of good humor restored, “it is most likely accurate, as Voldemort,” he paused to look at the few who flinched, “is a half-blood named Tom Riddle.”

He turned back to Sirius and Harry as the Order digested this new information.

“Do you know any other information besides the name of the mansion?”

“Well, I know where it is,” Harry answered, “and know part of the layout, as well as part of the grounds, and I think your Potions Master over there,” he nodded towards Snape, who looked deep in thought, “knows the rest of it.”

“The grounds?” Dumbledore asked curiously. “Why do you know--”

“Remember that whole 'information is on a need-to-know basis' discussion?” Harry asked, deceptively lightly. “This falls in that category.”

“Damn,” Sirius breathed, eyes wide. “That was where the--”

“Yes.”

“And the--”

Harry looked at Sirius impassively, one eyebrow raised.

“That settles it, then,” Sirius said, the over-protective look creeping back onto his face. “You're not going.”

Harry's other eyebrow raised to match the first.

“What makes you think that?” He asked silkily, daring Sirius to say it.

“Because you're not returning to where Voldemort held you captive, twice,” Harry's mouth tightened at Sirius's words. “Merlin knows what will happen if you go there a third time...”

“Well, then, we can't let Merlin suffer with that knowledge all by his lonesome,” Harry said icily. “So I'll have to go so we can find out.” Sirius opened his mouth. “Shut it, Jack. I'm going. If you have a problem with that, then I'll turn you into a Doxy and trap you in a suit of armor so you won't be going.”

Sirius crossed his arms and the two glared at each other. “One, there is no spell to turn a human into a Doxy, and, two, I could draw my wand faster than you, and you wouldn't be able to.”

“Who says I need a wand? Who says I'd need a spell for that matter? Nothing like good ol' Muggle experimental facilities...”

“You wouldn't!” Sirius gasped with a glimmer of amusement.

“I would,” Harry said with a grin. “And weren't you the one who wanted me to know more Order information anyway?”

“I claim insanity status!”

Harry threw his hands in the air. “You can't claim that at the drop of a hat and then deny it later!”

“Says who?”

“The Lord of Common Sense and Rationality,” Harry answered dryly.

“Never liked that one much,” Sirius answered. “Seems like one of the most boring of the lot.”

“Probably,” Harry agreed. “But I'm going.”

Sirius hemmed and hawed, before reaching a conclusion. “We'll see.”

Harry opened his mouth to continue the argument, but closed it, deciding to let Sirius keep his illusions for now.

“Well, now that that is decided, or not, as the case may be,” Dumbledore said, and Harry blinked, having forgotten that the Order was watching them, now with some bit of amusement and annoyance, “we can decide whether or not the Order is undertaking this venture.”

“Of course it is,” Harry said with certainty.

Several of the adults listening stiffened, even Snape coming out of his thoughts long enough to raise one eyebrow derisively.

“And why,” Dumbledore asked imperiously, “are you so certain of that?”

Harry grinned wickedly. “Extortion.”

“Begging your pardon?”

“Well, the way, I see it,” Harry drawled, as Dumbledore narrowed his eyes in comprehension, “if the Order doesn't take this mission, because it will need multiple people, I'll go by myself--”

“You will not!”

“Okay,” Harry acquiesced. “If the Order doesn't take this mission, Jack and I will go to Riddle Mansion, where Voldemort will capture and kill us, in which case Voldemort will once again be unstoppable here, or,” Harry continued, still in a blasé tone, “we will succeed in rescuing Patricia Williams, leave all the other prisoners there, and move to America. Let's face it: if Voldemort ever attacked America, there'd be no chance of stopping him anyway.”

There was a hoot of laughter in the back of the Great Hall, and someone spoke up, speaking in a thick twang that made McGonagall wince. “You've got that right. Voldemort wouldn't try anythin' there unless he was certain of victory. Riling up America is never a smart thing to do.”

“What would happen if Voldemort did attack America?” Lily asked curiously, and the American shrugged unconcernedly.

“We'd attack Britain,” he said plainly. “Then take over until we kill Voldemort. Hell,” he continued, “we might even stay over here for a couple years, just for kicks.”

Harry paled at the thought of that happening to his country. “That's it!” He exclaimed, slamming his fist into his palm and looking west. “We attack Voldemort at dawn!”

Everyone but the lone American looked amused.

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “aside from the fact that as the Order, you're supposed to be fighting Voldemort, and rescuing innocents...and standing up for justice and kindness, I suppose, you really don't have much of a choice if you ever want Voldemort defeated.”

“I can't believe you're using that to blackmail the Order into helping you!” McGonagall snapped, though she looked slightly appeased by the use of logic.

“Really?” Harry said in disappointment. “You didn't think I'd be smart enough to use that advantage?”

“No, I expected you to be ethical enough not to!”

Snape snorted, muttering, “Ethical,” disbelievingly.

“Oh,” Harry said, deflating. Then he shrugged. “Well, screw that.”

Dumbledore sighed, looking at the sky-like ceiling in a silent plea that Harry could only guess the contents of.

“Mr. Collins, I want you, Mr. Grimsleigh, Severus, and Alastor to start planning a reconnaissance mission, as well as a plausible retrieval plan. Lily, Alice, Remus, and Hestia, I want you to help Poppy restock any and all potions and medical supplies that might be needed, as well as anyone else with strong work in potions. Those of you, who work at the Ministry, please keep your ear to the ground for any information that might apply to this rescue mission.”

Sirius grinned ecstatically at actually hearing the words 'rescue mission,' relieved that rescuing Pat was a work in the makings now.

“Peter, Emmeline, please see if any of those nifty gadgets the two of you seem to collect would be helpful. Everyone willing to take part, please return in two days' time, and if anyone has any individual concerns, please come forward to talk with me. Meeting adjourned.

“Oh, and Mr. Collins, Mr. Grimsleigh?”

The two turned back around, having hoped to make a break for it while the getting was good. “There will be absolutely no more unauthorized interrogation of prisoners. Understood?”

They both nodded contritely.

“Not without extreme provocation,” Harry agreed.

“And authorized interrogations on people not prisoners are fair game,” Sirius consented.

Dumbledore put his head in his hand as if warding off a headache and waved his hand idly for them to go. "And here I thought Mr. Collins by himself was difficult," he said quietly to himself.

"Don't worry, Albus," Severus said, scowling at the doors, "not even you can be right all the time." He paused, and the scowl deepened. "And you don't even know the half of it."

The Headmaster chose to take that as a bad omen, as Severus strode away, cloak billowing behind him menacingly.

He turned to look at McGonagall. "See that, Minerva? He doesn't even give hints about his cryptic statements any more..."

Minerva frowned wordlessly, and Albus raised one eyebrow. "Don't tell me that you know what all that was about?"

She opened her mouth. "I must go send out the letters for incoming first years," she said croakily, before getting a murderous look in her eye and walking briskly away.

Filch ran in, looking hysterical. "Mrs. Norris! She's missing! Those two hooligans must have done something to her!" Filch's eyes bulged angrily as he spoke.

"Calm down, Argus," Lily said comfortingly as her husband tried to hide his laughter. "I'm sure the Weasley twins or Gideon and Fabian will return her in perfect health."

"Not those hooligans!" Filch spat, looking half-crazed. "Collins and that other one."

Albus's mouth twitched in an unwilling grin.

"Oh, dear," he said, trying to be serious, before going off to help the Hogwarts caretaker find his missing cat.

Chapter 20: The Best Laid Plans...

“So, what was that one problem?”

Harry looked at Sirius curiously, who elaborated.

“Before Pettigrew interrupted, you were saying something about there being a problem with not letting people know who I am?”

“Oh, well, yes... about that,” Harry said guiltily. “A couple people, beyond Pettigrew, of course, found out who I was. I decided to let them know, just in case something happened--”

Harry stopped at the sound of an angrily tapping foot, and looked up to see McGonagall and Snape with arms crossed and forbidding expressions on their faces. He accepted the interruption with a wry tone.

“Jack, meet Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape, the two people with the worst reactions to unsuspected news you'll ever meet.”

“If I remember correctly, Collins, you set up an elaborate scenario that made us become trapped in your mind, and only told us your identity after we faced a Basilisk,” Snape said bitinglly, making Sirius look at Harry questioningly. Harry nodded, confirming that he had set up such a convoluted thing.

“Or, to be closer to the truth,” the Potions Master continued, raising one eyebrow in a patent look of revenge, “I had to figure out who you were after you got amnesia from being poisoned by a Justern.”

Harry's glare of imminent revenge zeroed in on Snape, who smirked in malicious glee, as Sirius zeroed a glare of reproach at Harry.

“A Justern?” He exclaimed in disbelief. “What the hell is a Justern?”

“Language, Mr. Black!” Minerva snapped, and Sirius swiveled in her direction, eyes wide.

“You--but--but I--”

“If Collins is Potter, and Black is Potter's godfather,” Snape sneered, “then it's not exactly difficult to figure out.”

“Greasy git,” Sirius muttered, causing Snape's sneer to deepen.

“Ah, yes. Definitely Sirius Black.”

“The name is Jack Grimsleigh, actually, and I would prefer for you to use it.”

“And miss the ridiculous show when the emotional buffoons realize you are some long lost version of Black? As much as I would want to avoid the histrionics, I'm certain that you wouldn't want to put off the big reunion.”

Harry's eyes glazed as he leaned up against a nearby wall, staring into space.

“Actually, my reluctance to have that scene occur is no doubt greater than yours,” Sirius retorted, adopting the same sneering tone as Snape. “Hence me saying, and I repeat, my name is Jack Grimsleigh.”

“I'm sure that you don't have any spell work on you to keep me from calling you so, and, of course, it would make others realize that Collins is not quite who he says he is...” Snape smirked cruelly. “All in all, it would suit my purposes rather well, to cause grief, and allow the Order to formulate better plans with the knowledge.”

Harry's eyes refocused and narrowed at Snape, as well as watching Sirius to make sure there was no more violence then necessary.

Well, maybe not too much more than necessary.

Sirius stalked towards Snape angrily, wand out in a flash and mouth in a snarl.

“You seem to think that I will not ensure that you don't reveal my identity. You seem to think that I would allow you to threaten me or put me in the position of explaining my past to these versions of my friends. You also,” Sirius said calculatingly, “seem to think me similar to the Sirius Black here, if I don't miss my guess.”

His voice quieted, and his eyes hollowed, making him look, albeit healthier, no less frightening than he had the days after his escape from Azkaban.

“Let me assure you. I am not.”

Not being able to help himself, Harry discreetly pointed his wand at the ceiling to make thunder roil and lightening crash, fitting to the current mood of enmity. Then, deciding to add to the theme, Harry illusioned Sirius's and Snape's clothes to be from the Victorian era, and their wands to fencing foils, that, with a second, wiser thought, he made rubber as opposed to any kind of metal. Completing the scene, he also illusioned McGonagall's robes into a Victorian-style dress of the extremely wealthy.

“You knave! You dog! What rights do you call upon to threaten myself so?” Snape thundered, before blinking in bemusement.

Lightening crashed.

McGonagall shrieked.

And the Great Hall doors slammed open.

“Oh dear,” Dumbledore commented idly as he walked past with Filch. “I don't think I even want to know this time, though I must say, Minerva, after all these years of the staff trying to get you to let your hair down, I didn't expect an Elizabethan scene to accompany the occurrence. However,” he waved his hand as Minerva gaped angrily at him, “as you were.”

“Not exactly as you were!” Harry cut in as the argument looked ready to continue. “Or the Permanent Mute curses come out.”

Sirius opened his mouth to insult Snape one more time, but paused as McGonagall also joined in the threatening.

“You two! If you can't manage to behave like the grown human beings you are rumored to be--yes, the doubt applies to both of you--then I will ensure that you're not human in any aspect and Transfigure myself a new pair of beetles for the third years! Do we understand each other?”

Perhaps it was the stern tone she used, reminiscent of that used on first years that crept to Astronomy Towers with dragons in the middle of the night, but the two looked disinclined to argue.

“It's them, Headmaster!” Filch crowed maliciously. “Those two hooligans have kidnapped my Mrs. Norris... Who knows what condition she may be in! You must demand that they return her to me immediately--”

“For Merlin's sake,” Harry grumbled to himself. “I suppose it's just as well that this world's Mrs. Norris was never Petrified, or I never would have heard the end of it...”

“Exactly,” Sirius agreed as the caretaker's eyes bulged angrily at Harry's casual dismissal, as well as the mention of Mrs. Norris's possible petrification. “You would think that he would be used to people locking that thrice-cursed cat in suits of armor.”

McGonagall closed her eyes in quiet irritation, while Snape's frown acquired a deeper edge as he tried to not smirk at Filch's howl of fury.

“Suits of armor? My precious cat?” Filch shouted in outrage, and Harry took a step backward, leaving Sirius in the forefront, as he watched the vein in Filch's forehead with wary curiosity. And here he had thought that that particular vein-pulsing, darkening-puce facial expression was only possible for those of the Dursley family...

“Now, now, Argus,” Dumbledore said calmly, “I’m sure that Mrs. Norris wasn’t enclosed in any suits of armor...” Filch’s hands spasmed, as if imagining clenching them around Harry’s or Sirius’s, or both, necks, “...isn’t that right, Mr. Grimsleigh?”

“Of course, Professor,” Sirius agreed immediately, if not quite innocently. “Not suits of armor involved at all...”

“Just a Stunner,” Harry commented quietly.

“Yes, thank you, Chris,” Sirius said wryly. “A Stunner...and a Disillusionment Charm,” He added unwillingly.

“And a hex to turn her yellow.”

“You know,” Sirius said, turning around with his arms crossed, “it’s a miracle you have ever gotten away with anything, the way you go on about it.”

Harry shrugged unabashedly. “What’s the point of hexing Mrs. Norris if you can’t brag about it?”

“Getting away with it, perhaps?”

“Shut it, Snape.”

McGonagall sniffed and looked at them all with a glower of annoyance. “Come, Argus,” she said haughtily. “Let’s go find Mrs. Norris before any other mischief is created. Albus, come along.”

Dumbledore, who had been watching the ongoing show with a faint hint of amusement, sighed and followed the two. “I’ve yet to understand why everyone thinks I’m in charge, when there is so much evidence to the contrary...”

The three remaining wizards watched them trek towards Dumbledore’s office, Filch verbally abusing Harry and Sirius as they went.

“We should have just locked Mrs. Norris in a suit of armor, Hermione or no,” Sirius said regretfully.

“Says the one who won't be living in the castle for the next year,” Harry pointed out, before turning to Snape. “Shouldn't you be leaving now?”

Snape glared at him in outrage. “If you think I'm going to follow after that merry band of cat-hunters, Potter, then--”

He broke off to glare at the hidden mark on his arm, and Harry looked at the front doors with interest, observing the crested bases of wards that Hermione had once spoken of at length to an unfortunate band of first years. He had never coordinated his scar hurting with a Dark Mark within the castle before. Apparently, there was some sort of delay from Voldemort to Death Eater enclosed in the castle wards...

The question was: would that short span of time prove ill for Hogwarts, or good?

“Well, go on, Snape,” Harry shooed, annoying the Potions Master out of asking about Harry's seeming premonition. “I have to keep my mystique somehow, after all.”

With a glare towards Harry and a sneer at Sirius, Severus swept off towards the dungeons, a calculating gleam in his eye.

“I don't trust him,” Sirius said to Harry, arms crossed as they watched the Death Eater leave.

“You never did,” Harry reminded him.

“Neither did you.”

“Things change.”

((OoO))

“Jugson!” Voldemort barked as he entered the room, as he warded the room from any external spells. “How fares your information gathering?”

“Very well, my Lord,” he replied, nodding respectfully as he stepped out from the circle of his fellow Death Eaters. “The addresses of all the Mudblood second and third years have been discovered, with only a few more of the fourth years to find. My team awaits your orders.”

“Excellent,” Voldemort said, and Jugson nearly sighed with relief behind his mask. “Hold off attack until you find the fifth years as well. Follow the OWL results if needed, but we must attack as many as possible to create fear amongst the Muggles against the Wizarding World.” The Dark Lord turned to a Death Eater across the circle from Jugson, who had stepped back into place, already thinking of contacts that would assist, however unwillingly, in placing Finding Spells on OWL results.

“Severus Snape,” Voldemort began, and Severus stepped forward. “Any news from Hogwarts?”

“Yes, My Lord,” Snape said with respect before beginning his report. “Lucius Malfoy has indeed been captured by the Order--”

Hisses and mutters of outrage came from the surrounding Death Eaters, but Voldemort silenced them with a venomous look, motioning for Snape to continue.

“He is locked in Dumbledore's office, which his phoenix is guarding constantly, making the odds of rescue very low, My Lord.”

Voldemort scowled, tightening his grip on his wand. “I do hope you have some good news, Severus.”

“Yes,” Snape said with certainty. “The potion the Portkeys were spelled in worked as planned. No one can get any information from Lucius unless they are already fairly certain of the answer. The most

the Order can do is use him for confirmation, which is hardly what they expected.”

“That will only work as a temporary solution, Snape,” Voldemort said coldly. “You must find some means of removing him from that horrid castle without breaking your cover, or kill him. Now,” Voldemort continued, eyes narrowing in anger, “tell me about this Chris Collins that dared to defy me.”

Severus sneered at the mention of the name. “His name--not--” Snape started coughing as Voldemort raised one eyebrow.

“What do you mean, Severus?” Voldemort demanded. “His name is not--?”

Snape choked, but managed to say, “--Nordusci--Char--”

“The Nordusci Charm?” The Dark Lord said slowly as he watched Snape struggle to say something else. “No, no, don't fight it Severus, no one truly knows what happens to someone who tries to defy that particular charm, and I would hate to lose my Potions Master.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Snape conceded, relieved. “There is more. Apparently Collins's godfather had fallen through the Veil in the Department of Mysteries of his original dimension. They were reunited at the Order meeting last night.”

“Who is this second dimensional traveler?” Voldemort asked, his eyes sparking with interest. A single person falling into a new dimension was nearly unheard of, but two of such connection falling into the same new dimension...

“Jack Grimsleigh,” Severus said with a smirk, and Voldemort started laughing, as well as many of the Death Eaters.

“Grimsleigh,” Voldemort said with an amused shake of his head. “That poor, deluded Mudblood. He would be long dead for being such a thorn in my side if his efforts to retrieve his girlfriend weren't so amusing. Is he still trying to mount a rescue?”

“That is why he was at the Order meeting, My Lord,” Snape replied, albeit a bit hesitantly now. “Collins apparently knew of your headquarters in his dimension, and received confirmation from Lucius. The Order plans to rescue all the hostages in three days time.”

Voldemort's red eyes glimmered. “I am not thrilled that they know the location of my headquarters,” he said softly, and Snape didn't dare to move, “but due to our other plans, it is not nearly as much of a loss as it otherwise could have been. Besides, what a wonderful opportunity to take measure of our enemies' skill...”

“Bellatrix,” he snapped, and she stepped forward eagerly, “move Grimsleigh's prize into a relatively easy cell to find, and make sure she is capable of a little mobility. We wouldn't want this rescue mission to be too difficult, oh, no,” and Voldemort smiled maliciously. “I am quite interested in meeting this 'Collins'.”

((OoO))

Sirius watched the steadily flaming logs in the fireplace glimmer and flicker, morosely pondering his godson and the dimension he had left.

How could the world have gone so downhill, so fast? The major difference, he had to concede, was that Voldemort was trying to keep quiet before his ungraceful topple into this dimension, and that the dark wizard later started the war in earnest.

His eyes burned as digested everything that his godson had told him—sixteen-year-olds did not sacrifice themselves, for a girlfriend or otherwise, they did not throw themselves in the paths of a dark lord, they did not have to choose between killing innocent people and letting even more die.

Why was his godson forced to?

'Maybe,' he thought bitterly, 'if Dumbledore had bothered to tell Harry the prophecy, everything would have been different.'

Because that was it, he knew. He knew that Harry was moving desperately in the last year to make up for lost time, led by a guilty conscious that erroneously told him he was supposed to move sooner.

It was the same guilty, nervous energy that he, Sirius, had had upon escaping Azkaban. All the time lost, the feeling that he should have done much more than he had, the feeling that he had to rush through everything and get everything done to make up for years past.

But that had led him to the battle at the Ministry, the feeling that he shouldn't wait at Headquarters, despite whatever his common sense was telling him... Hadn't he missed enough battles? Shouldn't he make up for that?

Wasn't life short enough?

"There," Harry said, dropping his quill and turning away from his desk. "Now Hermione'll have proof that the Veil leads to alternate dimensions."

"Hermione?" Sirius asked in surprise. "You were writing to her? It's impossible to communicate with other dimensions..."

Harry waved away his questions as he tossed the letter into drawer already thickly layered with parchment. "Of course I was writing to Hermione. She'd kill me if she found out I went to an alternate dimension without writing down every little detail."

"But it's still impossible to--"

"Like being a werewolf Animagus?" Harry asked easily, magically locking down the desk. "I'll find a way eventually. Either that or I'll remember everything well enough to tell her after she dies."

A dark look skittered across his face. "Though, we will be having words if she dies before me..."

“But why Hermione?” Sirius asked. “Shouldn't you be writing love letters to Miss Lovegood?”

Harry scowled at him, a muscle twitching in his jaw as he tried not to grin. “You don't even want to know what happened the first time I tried to write her a love letter--”

“Oh, this'll be good...” Sirius drawled, settling back into his chair.

“Shut it. Have you ever realized that no Gryffindor can give good romantic advice?” Harry said in despair. “Not one of us!”

Sirius barked with laughter. “Why do you think your father had so much trouble? He kept taking advice from any guy he could find who would help him. He finally had to blackmail a Ravenclaw into giving him some pointers... Merlin knows the rest of us were having too much fun taking bets and generally meddling with the situation.”

Harry's eyes narrowed. “Bets? You people take bets on these kinds of things?”

Sirius decided denial was the better part of valor at this point.

“That's what the evil little sods were doing! What with Dean saying that the only spot in Hogwarts that wasn't patrolled at night was the dusty corridor with the statues of Lurham the Lewd and the seven-eyed wizard from France, and Seamus saying that girls hated being told they were intelligent, that it made them feel like they were being used...”

Biting his lip so as to not laugh, Sirius waved for Harry to continue.

“I always wondered how Dennis Creevey got his hands on a stock of Firewhiskey!” Harry exclaimed with an affronted look. “The little git was paid to turn my hair orange the day of the ball!”

“But happened with the letter?” Sirius asked, his voice a bit higher than usual to hide his amusement.

Harry sighed and slumped into his chair. "Kirke made me put a charm on this letter that he swore by, but wouldn't tell me what it did... I nearly nailed him to the Quidditch goal posts for Slytherins to practice with after Luna became worried that a French wizard named Frances Duprest was sending her love letters..."

Harry glared at Sirius, who was now shaking with contained laughter.

"Ginny overheard, of course, and ran off before I could explain anything...or kill Kirke," Harry said with a hopeful lilt at the second option. "She sent a Howler to him, scolding him for his 'depraved and illegal actions' against a fifteen-year-old. He sent back this official document by his lawyer, instructing us to cite the problem and hire an attorney..."

Harry ran his hand down his face in agitation.

Sirius howled with laughter.

"It's not funny!" Harry exclaimed, fighting a grin himself. "We almost had to go to court, and Ginny and Hermione blamed this whole thing on me. What I should have done was throw Kirke into the Forbidden Forest, beater or no."

"And what did Luna think of this situation?"

"Luna had a blast, thank Merlin," Harry said with remembered relief. "There were running stories in the Quibbler, she started selling spoof letters, and then we teamed up to give all of Gryffindor awful French accents. To this day," Harry said, shaking his head in wonder, "I have no idea what she did to make Duprest lay off."

"Harry," Sirius said as he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes, "you're such a Potter."

Said Potter almost voiced a complaint, but decided against it. "Wait until you meet the other two. I think they may be worse than me."

"The other two?" Sirius asked curiously. "James and Lily? What--"

Harry shook his head. "No, the other two."

Sirius mulled that over for a second before it dawned on him. "You have siblings?"

((OoO))

"Lily, dearest, the very love of my life--"

Harry frowned in his sleep as a very persistent voice pierced his slumber.

"Isn't our happy matrimony more meaningful than anything material?" The voice wheedled plaintively, becoming to Harry's groggy annoyance, louder.

"OW!"

Harry finally opened his eyes to see Sirius, reluctantly rising from a couch against the wall and trying in vain to keep his eyes open, shuffle towards the door, wand in hand.

"--but it screamed your name, Lily, and you were always saying you needed a new cloak... Where are we going?"

Closing his eyes again, Harry picked up his wand and pointed it in the direction of the door. "On the count of three, then?"

"And no mercy," Sirius grouched, never having been an early riser. "One--two--threee--"

Sirius lost the count as the door slammed open, surprising a yawn out of him.

Lily stopped short at seeing the two wands pointed at her head, before her easily overheard bad mood came to the fore once more.

“Don't be ridiculous,” she snapped, “and put those down before you hurt someone.”

In no mood to argue the point, Sirius pocketed his wand and started to walk drowsily back to the couch. “You know them, Chris,” he said, “so you get to deal with them. Enjoy.”

“Git,” Harry muttered, as Lily tugged on Sirius' arm to stop his retreat.

“How old are you?” She asked him, and he blinked at her in bemusement.

“Shame on you for asking, Mrs. Potter,” Harry said vengefully. “After all, a lady should never reveal their age.”

He got a glare for his trouble before Sirius answered the question, now awake. “Thirty -eight. Why?”

“Good,” she said with a decisive nod, pulling Sirius' arm around her waist. “You can be my ideal husband for the day.”

Harry, also, was now wide awake.

“I can what?” Sirius said in surprise. “Won't your present husband take unkindly to this?”

“Until he redeems himself and can reclaim the title of ideal husband, I don't particularly care.”

James gaped wordlessly throughout the entire thing, staring at his wife in dismay.

“Well, then, Mrs. Potter--”

“Lily, please.”

This got a squawk of protest from the still frozen James.

--Lily," Sirius said with an overdone flirtatious smile, Conjuring a rose, "may you have a very happy birthday."

Lily looked from Sirius, who was grinning sardonically at James, to Harry, who was laughing sardonically at the same target. She then eyed the last person in the room before turning to look back at Sirius.

"You're just as bad as Collins, Grimsleigh."

"That I am. Now, where'd you get such a lovely cloak?"

Lily frowned as she looked down at the pea-green, high-necked cloak with three inch thick padding, that, by consequence, made her look like she could float with no trouble and could beat Mary Poppins in a race, no umbrella required.

"Grimsleigh, you're fired."

((OoO))

He ran panting for the nearest unlocked door, heart racing, not even bothering to try and conceal himself or keep quiet. He strongly doubted that there was anyone within the building not aware of his general location. Stealth was no longer an option. His life depended on if he could reach the nearest Apparition zone before the Death Eaters could.

The dungeons had been close, he knew it. The hallway he was in was familiar to him, nearly as familiar as the dungeons themselves, though, in this dimension, he could have been near the roofs for all he knew. It had been after reaching the end of the hallway that he became confused, not knowing which way to turn, the two downward staircases seemingly interchangeable, both silent and dark.

Then he had seen the reflection of a Death Eater in the window across the hall, had seen the dark-robed figure momentarily freeze in surprise at seeing someone brazenly standing in the inner sanctum of the Dark Lord, and had bolted once the Death Eater raised some sort of alarm that brought several of his fellows flooding into the area.

He reached for the doorknob and threw himself against the door, hoping that he was near the outside, only to rear back in pained surprise as the door shocked him and the doorknob changed itself into a reaching black claw that held fast to his wrist.

He sent spell after spell towards the doorknob, now, trying desperately to get free, as Death Eaters swarmed around him and the shadow of a giant hand loomed over him before collapsing on him, squeezing his lungs until he couldn't breathe anymore...

Snape dropped the small wooden figure that Harry had been directing onto the table, away from the 3-D model of Voldemort's family mansion.

"That was horrendous, Collins. You could have at least not stood in the middle of the hallway, in plain sight."

"Because there are so many places to duck for cover in a hallway?" Harry retorted sarcastically, and Snape sneered at him. "I don't recall you doing any better. In fact, I recall you doing worse..."

"Followers of the Dark Lord would not blast holes through walls just to apprehend a trespasser that can just as easily be caught without destroying their headquarters--"

"That path is far too risky," Moody interrupted with finality. "Collins is right, Snape. No way to make that journey without detection."

"And do you have a brilliant plan in mind?" Snape asked bitingly.

"I don't need to have a plan to see a bad one. That hallway has no cover whatsoever. It's a deathtrap."

"What about an Invisibility Cloak?" Sirius interrupted with impatience. "Unless Voldemort can see through it..."

"He can," Harry, Snape, and Moody said at once, before turning and trading irritable glares.

“In any case,” Snape continued with an air of condescension, “unless you happen to be one of the rare few that possesses such a Cloak, the point is moot.”

“Because Moody, Dumbledore, and Potter don't have any, right?” Harry asked sarcastically. “However, if the main problem is getting in, not getting out...”

Moody shot a look at Harry, easily grasping his meaning. “You, of all people, should know better than that.”

“It would work, wouldn't it?” Harry continued, leaving Sirius and Snape to wonder if there was some strange vernacular of the paranoid that they could not yet grasp.

“It's not worth the risk,” Moody responded flatly.

“I'm flattered,” Harry said dryly. “But there is less risk than anything other situation. It would hours for it to even be a lethal situation.”

Moody quieted thoughtfully at that. “True, Collins. But that doesn't rule out insanity or non-lethal attacks, meaning it's still not worth the risk.”

“I'm not insane yet,” Harry pointed out. “And my versions had much more reason to want me so.”

“Dumbledore won't agree.”

Harry smiled grimly. “I don't hear any disapproval from you in that statement. Plus, it's Dumbledore. Of course he wouldn't approve. However, he no doubt realized the validity of this plan, and also knew that we would consider the possibility.”

Eye swinging to survey the entirety of the Great Hall, Moody still looked doubtful.

“I don't think there'd be any other way. Besides, I have to meet them all at some point,” Harry finished with wry humor, finally getting a nod of agreement from the old Auror.

“If you're certain, Collins. You'd certainly not be going into the situation with your eyes closed. However,” Moody nodded his head in Sirius's direction, “I can't see everyone agreeing with this plan.”

The Animagus narrowed his eyes. “And what plan is this, exactly?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders defiantly in response to Moody's question, ignoring Sirius's at the moment. “They'll just have to deal with it.”

It could have been Harry's imagination, but it seemed that Moody now looked at him with a faint touch of respect in his eyes. “You're an idiot, Collins.”

Harry waved the comment away. “So I've been told.”

“What foolhardy plan are you two hatching?” Snape bit out. Sirius nodded, seconding the Potions Master's lack of comprehension.

“The main problem with this situation,” Harry began carefully, “is entrance into the stronghold and the dungeons themselves, regardless of floor plans or maps. So, if we can manage to get someone within the building, getting out should be minor in comparison.”

He paused to think of the best way to voice the plan.

“Obviously,” Harry continued as Snape waved impatiently, “this person can't be Snape, as his position would be compromised and he'd become a greasy spot on the floor. Erm, no offense meant, of course.”

Snape curled his lip in a sneer of disgust.

Anyway,” he said hurriedly, “we obviously can't send someone to try to enter, because, however stealthy the person might be, they'll get caught as soon as they walk past the doors. That leaves having someone enter with the Death Eater's knowledge and sanction.”

“The only problem with that being immediate death by the hands of the Death Eaters,” Snape said slowly, as if Harry were an exceptionally dim centaur.

“Which isn't a problem if only Voldemort can kill me.”

((OoO))

“You know what we need?” Peter asked idly, casting a final touch to the Portkey before setting it down. He and Emmeline had been set the task of gathering together the pre-conceived charms. Though the Weasley twins and Prewitt brothers specialized in this area, Peter and Emmeline's enchantments had a preferred air of stability about them.

Though, in Peter's mind, this was rather unwise of them, disregarding a past Marauder so. He did, however, consider Order work off-limits, resigning himself to the rather mundane task of creating Portkeys, a draining and tedious process.

“And what is that?” Emmeline responded wryly. “Wormholes? Self-charming Portkeys?”

“Well, yes,” Peter conceded, “though I was thinking more along the lines of, oh, I don't know... a location maybe.”

Collins-- 'No, 'Harry', Peter reminded himself-- had been unable to tell them a definite location of Riddle's Headquarters, only able to describe basic landmarks around the area, landmarks that could have described a hundred places in the country. Harry had put a stationary image of the location in Dumbledore's pensieve for them to use as a destination for the Portkeys. This picture had been more useful than Snape, who responded bitingly to inquiries, rather tersely informing

the two that Death Eaters did not know more than the name of the house.

Instead of Apparating to a location, Snape had condescended to inform them in the past years, servants of Voldemort simply Apparated to the source of the Dark Mark. To Peter, who had studied the theory of Apparating quite thoroughly, this seemed rather woolly.

However, he wasn't the expert on Death Eaters, and was in no hurry to become such.

He shuddered at thought of the heinous crimes his counterpart must have committed. Not only the acts Harry had described in malicious detail, but the ones his over-active mind produced in his shame and horror of being in any way connected to the atrocities done by Voldemort and his followers. Was he responsible for the penance of his other self, if it was not truly he who was the Death Eater?

Were they even the same person, the same soul, or were they completely separate entities?

It had been a curiosity, a theoretical question sitting in the back of his mind since he had first heard the irrefutable proof that there were other dimensions, but now it seemed to be of vital importance.

Was he damned by the actions of another Peter Pettigrew? Coming from a thoroughly religious setting, the uncertainty set him on edge -- if his DNA, his family, his history, and even his Animagus form were shared with presumably multiple inter-dimensional Peters, then wouldn't his soul be, as well?

Or did the creation of individual spirits supersede that of universes?

He wondered if Harry had the same questions running through his mind like a worrisome ticker-tape, then wondered if the teenager had even considered them. After all, no Harry Potter existed in this dimension, hadn't for sixteen or so years, not until this new one had appeared.

And how much of a soul could that other version of Peter have had if he had betrayed his friends?

That in itself was a mystery that had kept him awake into the long hours of the night. What could he have done to make Harry hate him so much? Harry said that he had only discovered Peter's crimes a few years ago, meaning that they had happened much earlier... but what? And, surely, if Peter had betrayed them, James, Sirius, or Remus would have explained the whole thing to Harry at an early age.

Unless... unless...

Peter's mind reeled.

Harry had said that he didn't want to get to know the Potters while the war continued, and had asked for some Potter stories... were they dead? Had Peter killed them? No...

all clicked in his mind. He had betrayed Lily and James to Voldemort, who killed them.

He wavered, his knees barely able to keep him standing upright as he imagined the scene in his mind. They would have been under the Fidelius, of course. If the prophecy applied in Harry's dimension, there was no reason for that to be any different. But Sirius was the Secret Keeper, in this dimension, in any case.

There was no possible way for someone not the Secret Keeper to bring someone to the house. Even Portkeys had to be created by one.

Oh, God--had he tortured Sirius into giving up Lily and James's address? Or had he told Voldemort that Sirius was the Secret Keeper, leaving the Dark wizard to make Sirius suffer?

Peter had seen how stubborn Sirius could be firsthand. It wouldn't have been short.

His knees gave up on supporting him as a bad job, and he collapsed, filled with agonizing thoughts about what his counterpart must have done...

“Peter?” Emmeline exclaimed, rushing forward in concern. “Are you alright? What's wr--”

The door burst open, and Fabian Prewitt stuck his head into the room. “Collins and Grimsleigh are holding a full-out battle by the lake! They're both yelling enough to put a drunk general to shame! Hurry up if you want good odds. Moody's book-keeping, and offering five to one on Collins!”

With a last pocket jingle and a grin, Fabian disappeared back down the hallway. Peter and Emmeline shared a look a second long, then dashed after him, Emmeline only resisting the urge to bring her purse along with her when Peter scalded her with a brief scornful look.

((OoO))

--SUICIDAL--TOO YOUNG--”

--NO CHOICE--COMPLETELY LOGICAL--”

--IDIOTIC--”

--INNOCENT LIVES--”

--MUST HAVE DAMAGED YOUR HEAD--”

--PROPHECY--WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT--”

--NONE OF YOUR MOTHER'S COMMON SENSE--”

--BETTER ME DEAD THAN HER--”

--ALREADY DEAD--WASTING HER SACRIFICE--”

--MOST ABLE--CAN'T KILL ME--”

James shuffled uneasily as walked towards his wife. "What's going on? Gideon told me to come down here."

Lily jerked her head at the two arguing figures by the lake, both pacing in agitation and waving their arms angrily as they made their points. "Collins voiced the plan that he be bait for the Death Eaters, so he would be easily admitted into their stronghold and the dungeons. Grimsleigh...was less than chuffed with the idea."

"That's brilliant," James breathed, the problems with rescuing any Death Eater prisoner disappearing before his mind's eye. "Mad and stupid, don't get me wrong," James reassured Lily, who had looked at him with angry shock, "but brilliant. Dumbledore'll never let him do it, though."

"Quite the contrary," Albus said from behind him, causing James to jump. "It's the only plan that would have any chance at success."

"But that's insane, Albus! He's barely seventeen... how could you--"

Dumbledore raised a hand to stop James's protests. "I know. But I fear Mr. Collins would go through with this plan even if the Order refused to cooperate. I'd much rather he have our support than nothing."

"I hope he knows what he's doing," Remus commented softly, and Black nodded with him.

"Me, too," Mundungus Fletcher said, one pocket clanking suspiciously. "After all, I have ten galleons riding on him winning this argument."

"Fletcher!" McGonagall swooped down furiously, voice lined with disapproval. "How completely--"

"A galleon on Collins," Snape interrupted, giving the voiced amount to Moody, who nodded and hobbled off to avoid Minerva's glare.

“I'm not changing my mind on this!” Sirius yelled, as he and Harry neared the castle. “I refuse to let you-”

“What are you going to do, Jack?” Harry shouted in return, eyes narrowed. “Call it all off?”

“If that's what it takes!”

“And leave Patricia to die in some far-off hellhole?”

Sirius froze. “Low blow, Chris.”

“I know,” Harry sighed. “Sorry. But this is the best way of rescuing her. They can't kill me, and anything they do can be reversed. The same story doesn't apply to anyone else.”

They both turned towards the castle, momentarily surprised to see the entirety of the Order watching them with baited expressions.

“What?” Sirius barked crossly, and a couple people shifted uneasily.

“So, er... Collins...” Fabian Prewitt spoke up. “Did you win the argument?”

Harry answered firmly before Sirius could say anything. “Yes.”

Then his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why?”

Fabian gave him a jaunty salute and turned to a smug-looking Moody. “Well, let's see those pay-outs...”

Harry gaped at them before adopting a scornful look. “People always betting on me--ridiculous...”

He edged past the now talking group of people and disappeared from sight in the Entrance Hall.

Sirius, making sure Harry had left, walked over to Lily. “Potter, you're one of the Charms professors, right?”

“Yes,” she answered slowly, unsure of what Grimsleigh wanted, the dark look in his eyes unnerving her.

“Tell me everything you know about the Transfero Stimuli Curse.”

“What?” She asked in confusion. That spell was theoretical, with unknown side-effects at best, death or insanity at worst. “Why?”

“Now.”

Root of Hemlock, Slips of Yew

The faint moonlight shone down on a small, winding path through the forest, small gaps in the draping leaves showing a lupine form slinking across a path. Its ears pricked forward and its yellow eyes gleamed maliciously at the gate visible in the distance; padding up to the heavily warded padlock, the werewolf sat and waited for its orders.

He ignored the fact that he was now virtually trapped within the area. Like most old or wealthy families with enemies, the Parkinson had a border around their property that, once a person with direct ill intent against the family crossed it, restricted them from leaving it by any means except for help by a member of the family.

And Harry knew exactly how likely that situation would be.

‘A saving-people-thing, indeed,’ Harry thought as he narrowed his eyes at the gate, giving it a sweeping glance before focusing on the lock. ‘Why couldn’t I have just agreed with Snape and said that his plan would lead to immediate, safe, and completely unquestionable success?’

He gave a soft woof to signify that he was in place.

“We got the images, Collins,” Peter’s voice said tinnily in his ear. “Can you focus more on the hinges than the padlock? The lock is far too heavily warded. I think I can even spot a Ministry-built one that hasn’t been used since 1985--”

Harry gave another woof, rolling his eyes in annoyance as he stood impatiently in front of the hinges. Soft metallic laughter rang from his ear.

“Perhaps the lecture on rare Ministry wards can wait for a more opportune moment?” Dumbledore asked.

Peter cleared his throat. “Yes, well... You lot can all be quiet. I’ve heard too much about Quidditch from half the people in this room to accept any abuse on the matter.”

Harry growled in more obvious irritation.

“Pettigrew, perhaps you should focus on the fact that my godson is right outside a Death Eater’s house,” Sirius spoke up, cutting across the rest of the voices.

“We’re on it, Grimsleigh,” Hestia Jones said, stung, from farther away. “Believe or not, even experts have to look up some of the custom-made wards. Now, quiet, all of you.”

Watching the forest and grounds with suspicion, Harry shifted his weight to different paws, trying not to itch the unfamiliar apparatus laying across his forehead, one that laid a peculiar set of glasses in front of his eyes and put a small phone in his ear, finally trailing to encircle his neck like a very stiff collar.

Pettigrew and Jones had been true masters of their craft, plying Harry with the communication set and various metal-lined buttons that contained potions Madam Pomfrey expected Patricia to need.

“I don’t care if it doesn’t seem like she doesn’t need them,” the nurse had told Harry sternly after initially balking at the Order’s plan. “You will give them all to her, immediately, and make sure she drinks all of every single one. Do we have an understanding?”

Harry had hastily agreed, hiding the buttons along his jacket lining before transforming into his werewolf form and getting the uncomfortable collar snapped across his throat by a heavily disapproving Sirius.

“You’re an idiot, Harry,” Sirius had said, taking the opportunity of Harry’s inability to respond. “Don’t get me wrong--thank you. Thank you so much, because you are the one with the best shot of getting her back-- but are you sure you know what you’re getting into?”

Harry had stared at Sirius blankly after hearing that, images of stone walls and red eyes flashing across his mind, the sounds of his own screams ringing in his ears. ‘Of course I do--Moody, Snape,

Dumbledore and I are the only ones who do understand what I'm getting into.'

"Of course you do," Sirius had answered himself in an echo of Harry's response, his tone heavy with self-recrimination. "I should have been there to make sure you had never been in that situation, instead of being so stupid when fighting my cousin. But, I promise," he had told Harry seriously, "that won't happen again."

Not knowing if Sirius had meant doing something stupid or if he had meant Harry getting captured by Death Eaters, Harry hoped that his godfather meant the former, because any attempt of the second, Harry felt, was certain to not end well.

Harry jerked to the present as the bushes to his left rustled in the wind. Growling in apprehension, Harry padded silently towards it, eyes trying to peer into its depths.

"Collins?" Peter asked as the glasses projected the sight of the bush back to him. "What is it?"

Ignoring the question, Harry sniffed hesitantly at the plant, rearing back and sneezing as he caught scent of an unpleasantly remembered, coppery smell. He heard comments from Hogwarts about Hestia finding the type of ward and various questions about what had distracted Harry.

"Collins," Peter asked again in a more answerable format, "is there something alive in the bush?"

Harry shook his head silently, hoping the motion of the glasses would translate. Waiting a second to make sure Peter had understood, Harry began digging at the base of the bush, the smell growing stronger as dirt was loosened and scraps of roots were unearthed.

The smell nearly overpowering, Harry dragged out the last plant visible in the small hole he had dug. He paid no attention to the uprooted bush and focused his vision on the dirt-covered plants that

were giving off the scent that was a painful reminder of the plant that had been thrown at the doors of Hogwarts just a few days before.

“Christ Almighty,” someone from Hogwarts breathed. “Are they planning some kind of biological attack next?”

“Would some kind of vaccine be found in the blood Poppy took from Remus and Collins?” Lily asked. “Something we can distribute to the werewolves in Britain?”

“Assuming we can get any werewolves to trust it, or us?” Remus broke in sardonically.

“Also assuming we can get any werewolf to care about the lives of others,” added Snape in a heavily condescending sneer.

“Says the resident Death Eater,” Remus shot back.

“In any case,” McGonagall said over the two, “collect a few samples, Collins, then bury the rest as they were.”

Harry gave an incredulous woof.

“Oh, right!” Peter interjected. “Collins, picture a bag attached to your left arm--foreleg, sorry--and think ‘container animagus’.”

Harry gave a second incredulous woof.

“It won’t register as magic,’ Hestia broke in, her tone testy and impatient. “Just do it, Collins, so we can get on with this.”

Intrigued, Harry did as instructed, and watched with some bemusement as a bag appeared. He nosed it open and began picking up leaves and roots from the different specimens.

“No, not that one, Collins,” Snape exclaimed as Harry went for one of the older-looking roots. “It’s too old to have any similarity to the finished product. For Merlin’s sake, a show of intelligence would be appreciated.”

Harry woofed in acknowledgment and instead foraged among the newer-looking plants until a pair of identical cracks echoed like gunshots through the woods. Scurrying for cover, Harry kicked the dirt back around the now decidedly bedraggled bush and dove into the shadows, only yellow eyes visible as he peered around a tree to catch sight of the newcomers.

“Collins, what’s--”

A loud burst of static blasted into Harry’s sensitive ears, making him duck down and drag his head across the forest floor in a vain effort to get the earphone off before he quieted and stilled to watch the surrounding area.

Two cloaked figures rounded a nearby bend in the trees, one of them waving a wand parallel to the ground.

“Shouldn’t he be here by now?” One of them asked, a feminine lilt barely coming through the heavy cloth mask. “The plan was scheduled for ten o’clock, correct? No rescheduling?”

“None.” The second figure answered. “However, the agent wasn’t able to give too much information without being revealed.”

Growling softly in anger and alarm, Harry wondered who had betrayed him. A member of the Order, certainly; his first thoughts went immediately to Pettigrew, but he wasn’t certain if that suspicion was justified, or just lingering bias. The two weren’t Death Eaters, which fairly ruled out Snape in the odd event that, just as Pettigrew’s loyalties were the opposite in this world, Snape was a true Death Eater. The other members of the Order Harry didn’t know enough of to guess their motives or their loyalties.

‘Are these people from a new side?’ Harry wondered worriedly. ‘Are they on Voldemort’s side? The Ministry’s? Their own?’

“Well, there’re no traces of any recent humans here. Animagus, you think?” The first asked.

Harry's eyes widened. He hadn't heard of any way to trace humans, magical or otherwise, before, and it was doubtful that Dumbledore wouldn't have informed him of the possibility of any such spell.

'Who are these people?'

"The lad's seventeen." The second figure said skeptically.

The woman turned towards him with the patent patience of a primary schoolteacher. "I repeat: Animagus, you think?"

"No," the second one growled in obvious annoyance. "But do a sweep anyway. Crazy brat," he finished with a quiet mutter.

The second cloaked figure shot him a hidden dirty look before whispering a spell. A yellowy haze billowed from her wand, searching through the air like a living creature before sweeping towards Harry with a triumphant whoosh.

"Crazy brat, indee--"

Harry moved.

Paws finding purchase among the roots, he darted forward toward the two, growling and snarling ferally as he did so. Registering the recoil of fear from the man who seemed to be in charge, Harry chose him as the weaker of the two and leaped at him, ripping the fabric covering his face and barreling solidly into him. Hoping that the woman would stop to help him, Harry continued running forward, trying to reach the bend in the trees and relative safety that would give him a chance to return to Hogwarts; he would make sure to root out the spy before returning for a second rescue effort.

"Animagus reveal," the woman said calmly from behind him, the spell hitting him straight in the back of the head.

Muttering a curse as he tripped from suddenly finding himself in his human form, Harry waved his arms wildly and stumbled to an

ungraceful halt before spinning around and glaring at the witch staring at him impassively.

“What the hell do you think you’re--“

“Oh, calm yourself, Collins,” the woman said airily, blindly reaching out a hand to help her partner stand. “You’re far too interesting to damage.”

“And you don’t consider this mission that you seem to know all about, and just wrecked all to pieces, at all interesting, do you?” Harry’s voice dripped with ill-hidden anger.

“Don’t be so melodramatic; we didn’t wreck anything,” she responded, raising an eyebrow at him in the same supercilious tone she had used on the man now glaring at Harry grimly, hood askew.

“For Merlin’s sake, we’re standing outside a heavily warded Death Eater’s house,” Harry hissed. “Seeing as how you knew the exact time and location of what I was attempting, I expect you know that any magic in the area will register with the ward and send a veritable army of Death Eaters right to our location?”

The man grunted in amusement. “We’re not nearly so far behind as the rest of the world in our capabilities.” He sighed impatiently at Harry’s patently unimpressed look. “That portion of the wards is negated for a field of about seven meters.”

“Stupefy!” Harry shouted without a second’s pause, flicking out his wand and pointing it at the man before aiming at the woman. “Scalantus!”

The two spells bounced harmlessly off the shield the two had waiting.

“Do that again,” the man said, his eyes now glinting angrily, “and you will quickly become less interesting.”

“Be nice,” the woman chastised mockingly. “We did interrupt his rescue mission, even if we didn’t wreck it. Now,” she turned to look at

Harry, pulling her hood down as she did so, “an Animagus at your age; that's a pretty nice trick.”

“You'll excuse me if I don't take that compliment sincerely.”

Harry glared at the two coldly, eyes searching for some kind of identification or purpose. They both wore shapeless cloaks of some dark coloring, heavy fabric covering their arms and hands. The woman was holding a rather short, lightly colored wand while the man held no wand at all; instead, he held a rather odd metallic contraption Harry couldn't place.

He tapped a complicated pattern onto his device, and the area briefly crackled with faint sparks of magic. “Wards back on,” he informed the woman in a trained manner. “Level two possible discovery.”

Harry cursed. With no possible way to transform back into his Animagus form, he would either have to retreat and come back at a later date, something he didn't feel comfortable doing, knowing that the two in front of him, and possibly more people, had access to the Order's plans. Or he could continue, changing the plan as he went along: something that was sure to infuriate the Order, not to mention Sirius.

“Sit, please, Mr. Collins,” the woman said, settling herself in the grass. “We don't have so much time that it can be spent with the two of you glaring at each other. That goes for you, too,” she said with a short glance at her partner.

“How about I stand, and you tell me what you want?” Harry snapped.

“Suit yourself. But I'm hardly going to tell you much of anything at the moment; I suppose one of the most pressing things we want is to know why you haven't done anything about that skeleton you found near that Justern.”

Harry blinked. He had almost forgotten about that, busy with everything that happened since then. But what did it have to do with

these people? The skeleton had to be forty, maybe fifty years old, if the note he had also found was any indication.

Did that mean they were somehow related to JIESS?

That seemed to be the most likely argument, if, as the woman had said, the most pressing question was why he had done nothing...

“Because your club doesn't seem with the bother,” Harry said dismissively, taking up that guess and running with it. “Though I can't seem to remember... Are you in the one that hosts the weekly tea parties, or the one that passes out flyers?”

She glared at him, before smiling grimly in acceptance of the scored point.

“Neither, of course; we've been fighting against the Ministry, Order, and Death Eaters for years, though, and I'm sure this will gratify you, most of our recent effort shave been against the Death Eaters more than any other group.”

“You attack everyone, but at least you attack the murderers and bigots more than you attack anyone else. Consider me gratified.”

“Stop making quips and pay attention,” the man growled. “Maybe you'll actually learn something.”

Harry snorted. “I'm with the Order; you're hardly going to get any applause or sympathy from me.”

“Our efforts have been less successful than we wish,” the woman continued without pausing. “And we find ourselves in the position of having only one option left.”

Harry waited impatiently for her to continue.

“We're going to eradicate the Statue of Secrecy.”

“You're insane,” Harry said flatly. “Unless your goal is to completely wipe out the Wizarding World, of course.”

“I'm not sure if it was the same 'where you come from',” the man said, sardonically stressing the phrase, “but here the government is utterly corrupt. You can't be born from Muggles without having your life threatened, you can't have a containable disease without having your rights taken away, and you can't argue with the system, which is run by Death Eaters, and Order members, by the way, without being thrown in Azkaban or being thrown on the front lines.”

“I can hardly argue with two thirds of your argument, but I doubt the Order has done anything to warrant your attacks.”

“We have focused on them the least,” the woman conceded, “but they have warranted our stance nonetheless. Prejudice, judgment, high-handedness and refusal to act. They're only a step above the rest of the world that does nothing but wait for someone to save them.”

“Right,” Harry drawled, “and anarchy is so much better, of course.”

“It'd only be anarchy,” she responded, “if we didn't have a plan.”

“Watch the Order,” the man said, tapping his watch and showing it to the woman before standing up, “and you'll see what we mean. When you do, come for a visit.”

“Where at?” Harry asked, mind racing. He didn't believe them, of course; they had to have some information backing up their claims, though, which would no doubt help against the Death Eaters.

Yet, he remembered everyone's immediate reaction to him being about to speak in Parseltongue, and how Dumbledore, even in his original dimension, would concede to the Ministry's worst acts of corruption...

“We'll send you a package,” the woman said, “and you'll know where to go from there. And since the Order will be frantic by now,

I'm sure, tell them that those plants interfered with transmission, and that you had to guess the password to make the bag disappear. 'Recede container', by the way.

“Unless, of course, you plan to tell the Order about us.”

“Wards off,” the man interrupted. “Ten seconds before power drainage, if you're going to return to your Animagus form.”

Harry eyed them warily, before transforming back into his werewolf form. He growled shortly at them, and stood smugly as the man flinched back.

“Don't be such a git, Collins,” the woman said with an amused sigh, before putting her hand on the man's shoulder and disappearing.

The wards softly crackled back into place.

“--follow it to his last location, Black, it's not that difficult of a concept--”

“Seeing as how your only apparent skills involve adding one cube of sugar or two, Grimsleigh, instead of anything more useful, how about you--”

“Sirius, be quiet,” Peter said shortly, and Harry's ear twitched as he felt the device resettling. “Collins, what the hell was that? Any threat?”

The room quieted down immediately as he shook his head, then directed the camera at the no longer visible bag.

“Ah,” Hestia Jones said in recognition. “We didn't even think about interference from other systems; this is only safeguarded against wards and the like.”

“Something to fix later, then. Are you sure there's no trouble, Collins? If not, go ahead and examine those hinges again. We almost have it...”

Harry walked over to the gate once more, trying to memorize the scents of the two who had just left. Perhaps he would accidentally bump into one of them somewhere... the ability to recognize them, and then confront them on his own terms, would be a definite advantage.

He tuned out the snippets of advanced conversation from Pettigrew and Jones, catching occasionally names or bits of conjecture. Having already seen Bill Weasley explain the basics of them to Hermione, Harry had decided that they were far too complicated for practicality or genuine interest; even Hermione, who had brought the topic up, had had a rather glazed expression at Bill's conclusion.

The only similar topic Harry had any experience in was ward deconstruction, but, as the two conversing were simply trying to figure out the wards used, making the Parkinson home vulnerable to invasion wasn't on the agenda just yet.

“Got it!” The two exclaimed together.

“Anything either of you haven't seen before?” Lily asked. “There hasn't been anything published about new ones recently.”

“Nothing,” Hestia Jones answered smugly. “Hopefully that means they're all getting complacent, especially since the Parkinsons have connections to the experimental spells departments at the Ministry and would have new ones before anyone else.”

“With foreknowledge,” Pettigrew continued, “we could probably bring them down in an hour, maybe half of that at the less well-connected houses.

“Which means that our part in this venture is over until tomorrow, so, Moody, you're up.”

“You know the plan,” Moody said without preamble. “Try to take as many of them out before they capture you, especially the more fanatical of the lot. Your job is to get Williams and then get out. No investigating, exploring, or rescuing other prisoners. I don't want to

see any of those rookie mistakes from you, even if you are one. And I expect you to have finished your syllabus by the end of the week, so no slouching off. Got it?" He didn't wait for Harry's answer. "Good. Now go to it, Collins."

"Be careful, H—Chris," Sirius said worriedly, and Harry woofed in agreement. There was a short pause, and Harry could imagine his godfather's suspicious look.

"And don't even think about mocking them until you escape."

Giving a crackling sigh of disappointment over the receiver, Harry transformed himself and cut off communication.

'I never do think...'

--OoO--

"--Barty Crouch will definitely have to go, the misogynistic git."

"What was that, Bella?" An amused Crouch stuck his head through the doorway to look at her with wry amusement, and she looked up from the note she was writing.

"Not you, much to my dismay," she responded, rolling her eyes and he grinned, entering the room to sit across from her. "Your father, the almighty Minister."

"Ah, him. I'd be right in line with you, but then who would there be?" He asked, the question getting the attention of a few nearby Death Eaters. "Someone worse, no doubt. Remember that awful Senior Secretary he used to have?"

Antonin Dolohov raised one eyebrow, a look of distaste on his face. "Wasn't he arrested for forgery and misconstruing the budget a few years ago?"

"A corrupt Minister, though," Augustus Rookwood contemplated. "That'd be easier than a virtually blind Minister..."

“...and more useful than a corrupt head of Magical Games and Sports?” Bellatrix suggested archly, and he scowled.

“Alright, then, Black. Let's say we offed him-- sorry, you offed him, Crouch,” he edited at Barty's pointed look. “Who'd you pick as Minister that would actually be likely to get the spot?”

“Well, myself, of course,” she exclaimed, fluttering her eyelashes before frowning in thought. “A couple of days ago, I would have said Lucius could have gotten it. But he's still missing; besides, even if he did escape all safe and sound, my belief in his competency has reached an all-time low.”

Pollard Parkinson laughed at that. “Not to fear, Bellatrix. We should get him back in a couple of days, if Severus was right and the Order doesn't back out of their mission trip.”

The rest of the group gave him confused looks. “What does that have to do with it?” Barty asked, twirling his wand and making two quills dance across the table. “Sure, if we decided to actually hold onto Collins and use him as ransom, then those fools would release Lucius, but we're not.”

Parkinson lowered his voice conspiratorially. “It's not just Collins that we're going to use as ransom. Our Lord has--”

He broke off suddenly, as his pocket started shouting his name. Looking simultaneously annoyed and concerned, he pulled a mirror out of his pocket, which had his daughter's face on it.

“What is it, Pansy?”

“It's the wards! Some lunatic is outside, throwing curses at the house!”

Pollard's mouth tightened, a grim expression on his face. “Is he alone?”

“As far as I can tell, but he hasn't let up on spells yet and... damn! He's putting spells around the house that should be visible for miles. You need to hurry, Father, or the Aurors will show up to see what is going on...”

“Do you need some backup?” Augustus interrupted, standing up and pulling out his wand.

“I don't think so, but it wouldn't hurt,” Parkinson responded, an angry gleam in his eye. “The wards are open to your Apparation. Come if you want, since it should prove to be very entertaining once I get my hands on him...”

--OoO--

Hurriedly conjuring near-indestructible neon ropes that wrapped themselves around Parkinson's gate, Harry watched the grounds for any appearing Death Eater who, he was sure, had received the message from the figure watching Harry angrily through the front windows.

While Jones and Pettigrew had suggested using the opportunity to gain intelligence on which wards the Death Eaters were most likely to use, they had added that actually destroying the wards, especially just to get attention, would waste a chance to do some damage later. Harry had agreed to the stipulation, telling them that the Parkinsons had a collection of banned items that not even a corrupt Ministry could ignore.

Instead of breaking into the house, Harry decided that he might as well be caught vandalizing the exterior as opposed to any other scenario: not only had a majority of the Order refused to let Harry skulk around Knockturn Alley until being kidnapped, this plan had a rather strong chance of drawing negative attention to the Parkinsons. He also laying some a few rudimentary defenses, sending word-activated explosive spells to be absorbed by the ground.

With that last thought, Harry pointed his wand towards the sky and drew a caricatured Dark Mark followed by a line of text inviting all

interested wizards to apply for Death Eaters status through the Parkinsons, sending a sarcastic wave to the visibly furious silhouette watching him.

Sending several simple spells to splash uselessly against the gate, Harry waved sarcastically once more at the figure in the window before turning around and surveying the grounds behind him consideringly.

While the family and, more importantly, Voldemort, might be content thinking Harry was simply snooping and fell afoul of the wards, Harry wished for a more solid alibi for his getting caught in the trap. Perhaps he could be, after catching Malfoy so easily, attempting the same with the Parkinsons?

A rather thin excuse, too thin for Harry's comfort, but--

“Crucio!”

With a small squawk of surprise that he would later deny, Harry ducked and spun to see the incoming opponent. The red light splashed against the tree behind him as Death Eaters came into view.

“Is that all you've got?” Harry yelled in return as he took cover among the trees, knowing it would be useless to send any spells back until they had cleared the wards.

“Crucio!”

In an almost orchestrated response, nearly a dozen beams of similar light honed in on him, and the battle was on.

--OoO--

Robin McIntyre bit his lip in an obvious attempt to hide his facial expression as he scanned the horizon along the edge of Parkinson's property.

The owner of the property, on the other hand, took no such measure.

Face tightened into a furious grimace, Pollard wrenched the front door open and marched out onto the grounds towards the silhouette figure playing merry hell in the distance.

“Bet it's one of Dumbledore's lackeys,” Barty muttered to Bellatrix in amusement, setting a meandering speed at which the group followed Parkinson.

“Maybe,” she responded doubtfully. “Most of them have more common sense or more cowardice.”

“Black?” He asked in negating response. “Those Weasley and Prewitt horrors? Having common sense?”

“A point for each of us, then, as you didn't defend the second variable.”

Robin took a stumbling step towards the two, eyes focused on the bastardized Dark Mark instead of the uneven ground. “I'll see that Dumbledore's lackey and raise you a Collins.”

“Collins, already?” Nott said incredulously. “Good Lord, Severus just might be on our side after all.”

Augustus sighed sorrowfully as he aimed his wand at Collins. “Remember, Nott: he that lives upon hope will die fasting.”

In synchronism, the small group cast the Cruciatus at the human-shaped shadow that revealed Collins's hiding place.

McIntyre watched as Collins dodged and, turning his wand into a spotlight that made them all wince at the sudden light before the brief spell faded, said, “You know, I can do that spell, too. How about a little extension of vocabulary?”

“Really?” Parkinson said coldly as he levitated over the gate, tossing a spell at Collins as he did so. “Let's see it, then, boy.”

“I'd much rather use it on that Black still hiding behind the fence; you don't interest me nearly as much.”

“Then you certainly chose the wrong house,” Parkinson responded, keeping up a steady blur of spells that Collins apparently didn't recognize, choosing to dodge them instead of risk a shield charm. “Because you are now on my list of interest!”

“Scantalus!” Collins shot back, the voiced spell requiring Pollard's first dodge, and Parkinson counterattacked with a navy spell that met its mark.

Bellatrix sighed in disappointment from her vantage point next to Robin. “Alas, it's entirely possible that Pollard won't even need our help.”

Robin eyed her critically. “Nothing in that sentence said that we shouldn't go out and help him anyway.”

He bit his lip nervously as she turned towards him, the stark reminder that she held a superior posture to him suddenly evident in her stance.

“For a new one, you're certainly learning quickly,” she acceded before turning to the fighting pair, leaving Robin to breathe in relief. “Parkinson,” she shouted, “is your dignity and sense of superiority restored?”

“Restored?” The Death Eater returned indignantly, gritting his teeth as his shield charm attempted to buckle under one of Collins' spells. “They were never at ris--”

He paused in a moment of irked realization and sent three silvery domes to the ground, face etched with anger as he glared contemptuously at his opponent. “Explosives? Explosives? Do not try your paltry spells on me, Collins – I have little patience for schoolyard tricks.”

With a quick slash of his wand, he sent the domes hurtling towards Collins. He then removed the spell as they neared his opponent,

watching as the delayed detonations sent Collins flying solidly into the ground a distance away.

“Wonderful,” Rookwood said happily as he also levitated over the fence. “That means it's our turn.”

--OoO--

“Still,” Lily said, brow creasing with annoyed confusion, “we should have done this before, just in case Malfoy knows something that could help Collins.”

Snape scowled. “If you had been paying any attention, you would have heard me say that not only will Veritaserum probably fail to give us many answers, letting Collins overhear any valuable information before packing him off to get captured by the Dark Lord is a less than intelligent plan. Do I need to repeat myself once more?”

“That's all well and good,” Peter said, “but what if there is some trap or spell that will result in Collins getting into deeper trouble than we planned? Malfoy might also know if Voldemort decided to suspend whatever the hell he was up to.”

“The Dark Lord is not one to tell all of his followers one thing, and then tell just one of them something contrary,” Snape said, annoyed. “Even if he did elect to be at the mansion, Malfoy would hardly be aware.”

“At this stage,” Albus interrupted with finality. “All we can do is continue the path we have chosen and hope that Alastor has success.”

“Wait a second,” Peter said, stopping them all from moving and interrupting Snape's disgruntled comment about the Auror. “If Voldemort made it so Veritaserum doesn't work on Malfoy, and we try to force the issue, couldn't we potentially send him to another dimension? Considering the little knowledge we have of the topic...”

There was a moment of uneasy contemplation, before the door to the room holding Malfoy captive opened. Those waiting in Dumbledore's office looked up curiously, only to see Moody's scowl and Minerva shaking her head.

"I never thought I would ever applaud Voldemort for anything," Moody told the room at large, "but he certainly has us beat in this respect."

"Nothing?" Lily asked. "What about other truth serums, spells..."

"If Veritaserum won't work," McGonagall answered, "then nothing will."

"I don't know about that," Moody argued, giving a pointed look to Dumbledore, "Collins and Grimsleigh seemed to have the right idea."

Snape waved his hand in dismissal of that sentence. "As much as I hesitate to stand between an Auror and a path of violence, Collins was fairly certain of where the Dark Lord holds court, and wouldn't have depended on Lucius's answer to make his decision. We, on the other hand, would have such a dependence."

"So," Lily said in a voice of uncertainty, "now we wait?"

"No," Snape said, "now we make sure that Grimsleigh or anyone else does not do something monstrously idiotic while we wait." And, with that last statement, he left the office without another word.

Everyone else stood and began waling to the door in partial agreement. "Am I the only one with the feeling that Snape doesn't like Grimsleigh?" Peter asked facetiously.

"Is there anyone here who actually thinks Snape is fond of anyone?" Moody responded.

Lily watched them leave hesitantly, quietly positioning herself to be the last one left in Dumbledore's office. Not quite sure if she was taking the right course of action, she gave all the portraits a pleading

look for silence, knowing that they'd temporarily comply out of curiosity, and darted into the room where Malfoy remained a prisoner.

“Malfoy,” she greeted levelly as she pulled the door mostly shut behind her and pulled out her wand.

“Mudblood,” he responded in just as bland a tone.

It's the only thing I can think of, she remembered Grimsleigh saying from a conversation earlier that day. If I stop him from going, and that's a definite 'if', he'd just go later.

He obviously knows what he's getting into, she had responded, and Grimsleigh had given her a look that told her he knew she didn't believe that. Well, what do you want me to do about it?

The Transero Stimuli, of course. You know how to cast it. I don't, or I wouldn't have mentioned it at all to you.

Her eyes had gone wide at this. You want me to cast it on you? Aside from the fact that I have no idea what all the spell could do, and the fact that I don't routinely go around cursing people just because they ask, don't you think Collins will be a little less than happy at the idea?

He had laughed at her, and she was nearly tempted to just walk away when he shook his head. That's not what I was asking you at all. If there were no other option, then yes, I would be asking that, but...

But? She asked curiously. What do you want me to do, cast it on Snape?

No. He had said, after looking tempted by the thought. I want you to cast it on Malfoy.

Let me get this straight. She had responded with an angry frown. You want me to torture Malfoy, in order to stop Collins from the same? Something he volunteered for?

Yes.

She sighed unhappily as she remembered the direct answer. For all that she despised the idea in principle, she still found herself standing in front of a bound and wandless Malfoy, preparing to curse him.

She looked at him for a second, and Malfoy returned the gaze with a condescending sneer and a raised eyebrow. Her eyes narrowed.

Later, after she had elicited promises of silence from the portraits and given a short nod of success to Grimsleigh's questioning look, she realized that it hadn't been half so hard as she imagined it to be.

--OoO--

'This,' Harry realized as he attempted to move his arms underneath him and sit up, 'was one of my least intelligent plans.'

"Wonderful," he said out loud as he stood up, trying to hasten his eyes' adjustment to the dim light as he searched for his wand. "Absolutely, mindblowingly --"

"Wonderful!" He heard one of the Death Eaters yell out, and he continued to search frantically for his wand. "That means it's our turn."

"Oh, hell," Harry muttered, as he turned to see them leave the boundary of the gate. Giving his wand up for lost, and taking the small consolation that at least the Death Eaters couldn't take it from him, he hurriedly climbed the nearest tree and waited for someone to pass underneath.

"We should really do this more often, Parkinson," he heard Bellatrix comment in the distance. "Just trap all our mildly amusing opponents in your wards and go hunting when we have a spare moment."

"A wonderful idea, Black," Pollard responded dryly. "Except for the fact that if they're left alone, they start decorating with all sorts of tacky spells."

“What's even more annoying,” another one said nearby, and Harry glared as Barty Crouch Jr. came into sight as he walked underneath him, “is when they think they've outsmarted you by hiding in a tree like they haven't yet evolved.”

Not waiting for Crouch to do anything but glance up with an amused expression, Harry jumped and tackled Crouch, kicking him in the stomach and wrenching the wand from his grasp. “Reducto!”

An opaque shield appeared in front of Crouch just in time to take the spell.

“Give it up, Collins,” Parkinson said as he walked out of the shadows of the forest, other Death Eaters doing the same until they had Harry surrounded in a near circle. “I'd be amused if I weren't equally annoyed, and you'd do best not do anything more to tip the balance.”

Harry looked quickly around him, counting his opponents and knowing that there was no way he'd be able to defeat any of them, let alone continue the fight. He didn't remember the Death Eaters, especially Parkinson, of his past being as skilled, and, after the easy capture of Lucius Malfoy, had seriously miscalculated.

Grimacing bitterly, Harry prepared to throw Crouch's wand on the ground in surrender.

“Wait!” Bellatrix said suddenly, and Harry tightened his grip on the weapon reflexively. “Our little Order member here promised me a Cruciatus.”

Various groans of annoyance circulated through the group, and Parkinson frowned. “Black, must you really? He doesn't even have his own wand -- you can curse him later without toying with him.”

“It's called magic, Pollard,” Bellatrix responded. “Accio Collin's wand.”

Harry smiled as Bellatrix frowned in frustration and spun to glare at him. "Collins! Where is it?"

Raising an eyebrow, Harry just stared coldly back, a smug grin in place. While rather frightened to be so easily beaten, Harry resolved to keep his tradition of making his captors just as unhappy as himself, regardless of Sirius's admonishment.

Scowling, she waved her wand again in the direction Harry had been thrown earlier. "Accio wand!"

This, much to Harry's dissatisfaction, was successful, and Harry's wand flew into Bellatrix's outstretched hand. She stared at it with a dissecting look, before giving a bark of laughter. "Petty dark magic?" She asked incredulously, holding out the wand Harry had made several days ago, one which Harry valued much less than the one he had bought from Ollivander. "Pathetic. Crucio!"

Harry fell on all fours as it made contact, clenching his jaw to not make a sound as imagined knives bit into him and his limbs twitched as his senses were overcharged for a timeless second .

Then it stopped.

Or so Harry thought, until he realized that his muscles were still unconsciously jumping and Bellatrix was still pointing his wand at him. It hadn't stopped, Harry thought with a bit of wonder, he just couldn't feel it.

Trying to ignore the part of his mind that had firmly decided not feeling the curse probably wasn't a good thing, Harry had hardly noticed that the Cruciatus was lifted until Bellatrix spoke.

"I'm disappointed," she said dropping it to the ground. "He tried to take us on with a wand that doesn't even work right. We must not be intimidating enough."

“Or,” Harry said, dragging a numb hand through the thistle covered topsoil without feeling a thing, “you and your two-bit Lord just aren't worth the effort.”

Parkinson waved his hand dismissively at Harry's statement as he walked towards the middle of the circle where Harry stood. “Keep in mind that you are out-manned, outmaneuvered, and,” he waved his wand and dissolved Harry's lighted conjurations with a second's incantation, “without much experience. If we aren't worth the effort, what does that make a Mudblood like yourself?”

He clamped his hand onto Harry's shoulder, and, shoving him roughly to the side while still keeping contact, activated a Portkey. Wincing at the sudden maelstrom of wind and the disarming journey typical of such travel, Harry could barely sense the other Death Eaters following them before the Portkey deposited the two on the ground.

Never having become accustomed to travel by Portkey, Harry stumbled and fell to the ground before warily looking around.

“Good evening, My Lord,” Parkinson said pleasantly to a figure not standing far from where Harry knelt ungracefully.

“To you as well, Pollard,” Voldemort responded, an undercurrent of amusement in his voice. “I see you were successful a bit earlier than planned.”

Harry froze momentarily at the sound, paling as he realized the severity of the situation. Far from being a relatively simple, however painful, rescue attempt, this had now become something Harry doubted his ability to walk away from.

'At least,' he thought as he slowly reached for the knife he had threatened Pettigrew with just days ago, 'I won't feel anything.'

“ Good evening, Tom Riddle,” Harry said darkly as he stood, gleefully taking in Voldemort's angry surprise at the name. “It's such a pleasure to meet you.”

And he lunged, knife in hand, for the kill.

--OoO--

A/N: Well. Aside from the abysmally long time to write this, at least it has the beginning of the major plot. I had told a few people that this would be the last chapter (it'd have been a lot longer), and then I could start on a sequel – one with a plot, storyline, etc...

Then I realized that it took 8 months to write only 15 pages, and it seemed that that plan didn't stand too much of a chance of becoming reality.

So, if you have any questions, comments, scathing reports, or something you want to happen in this (because writer's block sucks nearly as much as trying to remember something off the tip of your tongue) please review!

Root of Hemlock, Slips of Yew

The faint moonlight shone down on a small, winding path through the forest, small gaps in the draping leaves showing a lupine form slinking across a path. Its ears pricked forward and its yellow eyes gleamed maliciously at the gate visible in the distance; padding up to the heavily warded padlock, the werewolf sat and waited for its orders.

He ignored the fact that he was now virtually trapped within the area. Like most old or wealthy families with enemies, the Parkinson had a border around their property that, once a person with direct ill intent against the family crossed it, restricted them from leaving it by any means except for help by a member of the family.

And Harry knew exactly how likely that situation would be.

‘A saving-people-thing, indeed,’ Harry thought as he narrowed his eyes at the gate, giving it a sweeping glance before focusing on the lock. ‘Why couldn’t I have just agreed with Snape and said that his plan would lead to immediate, safe, and completely unquestionable success?’

He gave a soft woof to signify that he was in place.

“We got the images, Collins,” Peter’s voice said tinnily in his ear. “Can you focus more on the hinges than the padlock? The lock is far too heavily warded. I think I can even spot a Ministry-built one that hasn’t been used since 1985--”

Harry gave another woof, rolling his eyes in annoyance as he stood impatiently in front of the hinges. Soft metallic laughter rang from his ear.

“Perhaps the lecture on rare Ministry wards can wait for a more opportune moment?” Dumbledore asked.

Peter cleared his throat. “Yes, well... You lot can all be quiet. I’ve heard too much about Quidditch from half the people in this room to accept any abuse on the matter.”

Harry growled in more obvious irritation.

“Pettigrew, perhaps you should focus on the fact that my godson is right outside a Death Eater’s house,” Sirius spoke up, cutting across the rest of the voices.

“We’re on it, Grimsleigh,” Hestia Jones said, stung, from farther away. “Believe or not, even experts have to look up some of the custom-made wards. Now, quiet, all of you.”

Watching the forest and grounds with suspicion, Harry shifted his weight to different paws, trying not to itch the unfamiliar apparatus laying across his forehead, one that laid a peculiar set of glasses in front of his eyes and put a small phone in his ear, finally trailing to encircle his neck like a very stiff collar.

Pettigrew and Jones had been true masters of their craft, plying Harry with the communication set and various metal-lined buttons that contained potions Madam Pomfrey expected Patricia to need.

“I don’t care if it doesn’t seem like she doesn’t need them,” the nurse had told Harry sternly after initially balking at the Order’s plan. “You will give them all to her, immediately, and make sure she drinks all of every single one. Do we have an understanding?”

Harry had hastily agreed, hiding the buttons along his jacket lining before transforming into his werewolf form and getting the uncomfortable collar snapped across his throat by a heavily disapproving Sirius.

“You’re an idiot, Harry,” Sirius had said, taking the opportunity of Harry’s inability to respond. “Don’t get me wrong--thank you. Thank you so much, because you are the one with the best shot of getting her back-- but are you sure you know what you’re getting into?”

Harry had stared at Sirius blankly after hearing that, images of stone walls and red eyes flashing across his mind, the sounds of his own screams ringing in his ears. ‘Of course I do--Moody, Snape,

Dumbledore and I are the only ones who do understand what I'm getting into.'

"Of course you do," Sirius had answered himself in an echo of Harry's response, his tone heavy with self-recrimination. "I should have been there to make sure you had never been in that situation, instead of being so stupid when fighting my cousin. But, I promise," he had told Harry seriously, "that won't happen again."

Not knowing if Sirius had meant doing something stupid or if he had meant Harry getting captured by Death Eaters, Harry hoped that his godfather meant the former, because any attempt of the second, Harry felt, was certain to not end well.

Harry jerked to the present as the bushes to his left rustled in the wind. Growling in apprehension, Harry padded silently towards it, eyes trying to peer into its depths.

"Collins?" Peter asked as the glasses projected the sight of the bush back to him. "What is it?"

Ignoring the question, Harry sniffed hesitantly at the plant, rearing back and sneezing as he caught scent of an unpleasantly remembered, coppery smell. He heard comments from Hogwarts about Hestia finding the type of ward and various questions about what had distracted Harry.

"Collins," Peter asked again in a more answerable format, "is there something alive in the bush?"

Harry shook his head silently, hoping the motion of the glasses would translate. Waiting a second to make sure Peter had understood, Harry began digging at the base of the bush, the smell growing stronger as dirt was loosened and scraps of roots were unearthed.

The smell nearly overpowering, Harry dragged out the last plant visible in the small hole he had dug. He paid no attention to the uprooted bush and focused his vision on the dirt-covered plants that

were giving off the scent that was a painful reminder of the plant that had been thrown at the doors of Hogwarts just a few days before.

“Christ Almighty,” someone from Hogwarts breathed. “Are they planning some kind of biological attack next?”

“Would some kind of vaccine be found in the blood Poppy took from Remus and Collins?” Lily asked. “Something we can distribute to the werewolves in Britain?”

“Assuming we can get any werewolves to trust it, or us?” Remus broke in sardonically.

“Also assuming we can get any werewolf to care about the lives of others,” added Snape in a heavily condescending sneer.

“Says the resident Death Eater,” Remus shot back.

“In any case,” McGonagall said over the two, “collect a few samples, Collins, then bury the rest as they were.”

Harry gave an incredulous woof.

“Oh, right!” Peter interjected. “Collins, picture a bag attached to your left arm--foreleg, sorry--and think ‘container animagus’.”

Harry gave a second incredulous woof.

“It won’t register as magic,’ Hestia broke in, her tone testy and impatient. “Just do it, Collins, so we can get on with this.”

Intrigued, Harry did as instructed, and watched with some bemusement as a bag appeared. He nosed it open and began picking up leaves and roots from the different specimens.

“No, not that one, Collins,” Snape exclaimed as Harry went for one of the older-looking roots. “It’s too old to have any similarity to the finished product. For Merlin’s sake, a show of intelligence would be appreciated.”

Harry woofed in acknowledgment and instead foraged among the newer-looking plants until a pair of identical cracks echoed like gunshots through the woods. Scurrying for cover, Harry kicked the dirt back around the now decidedly bedraggled bush and dove into the shadows, only yellow eyes visible as he peered around a tree to catch sight of the newcomers.

“Collins, what’s--”

A loud burst of static blasted into Harry’s sensitive ears, making him duck down and drag his head across the forest floor in a vain effort to get the earphone off before he quieted and stilled to watch the surrounding area.

Two cloaked figures rounded a nearby bend in the trees, one of them waving a wand parallel to the ground.

“Shouldn’t he be here by now?” One of them asked, a feminine lilt barely coming through the heavy cloth mask. “The plan was scheduled for ten o’clock, correct? No rescheduling?”

“None.” The second figure answered. “However, the agent wasn’t able to give too much information without being revealed.”

Growling softly in anger and alarm, Harry wondered who had betrayed him. A member of the Order, certainly; his first thoughts went immediately to Pettigrew, but he wasn’t certain if that suspicion was justified, or just lingering bias. The two weren’t Death Eaters, which fairly ruled out Snape in the odd event that, just as Pettigrew’s loyalties were the opposite in this world, Snape was a true Death Eater. The other members of the Order Harry didn’t know enough of to guess their motives or their loyalties.

‘Are these people from a new side?’ Harry wondered worriedly. ‘Are they on Voldemort’s side? The Ministry’s? Their own?’

“Well, there’re no traces of any recent humans here. Animagus, you think?” The first asked.

Harry's eyes widened. He hadn't heard of any way to trace humans, magical or otherwise, before, and it was doubtful that Dumbledore wouldn't have informed him of the possibility of any such spell.

'Who are these people?'

"The lad's seventeen." The second figure said skeptically.

The woman turned towards him with the patent patience of a primary schoolteacher. "I repeat: Animagus, you think?"

"No," the second one growled in obvious annoyance. "But do a sweep anyway. Crazy brat," he finished with a quiet mutter.

The second cloaked figure shot him a hidden dirty look before whispering a spell. A yellowy haze billowed from her wand, searching through the air like a living creature before sweeping towards Harry with a triumphant whoosh.

"Crazy brat, indee--"

Harry moved.

Paws finding purchase among the roots, he darted forward toward the two, growling and snarling ferally as he did so. Registering the recoil of fear from the man who seemed to be in charge, Harry chose him as the weaker of the two and leaped at him, ripping the fabric covering his face and barreling solidly into him. Hoping that the woman would stop to help him, Harry continued running forward, trying to reach the bend in the trees and relative safety that would give him a chance to return to Hogwarts; he would make sure to root out the spy before returning for a second rescue effort.

"Animagus reveal," the woman said calmly from behind him, the spell hitting him straight in the back of the head.

Muttering a curse as he tripped from suddenly finding himself in his human form, Harry waved his arms wildly and stumbled to an

ungraceful halt before spinning around and glaring at the witch staring at him impassively.

“What the hell do you think you’re--“

“Oh, calm yourself, Collins,” the woman said airily, blindly reaching out a hand to help her partner stand. “You’re far too interesting to damage.”

“And you don’t consider this mission that you seem to know all about, and just wrecked all to pieces, at all interesting, do you?” Harry’s voice dripped with ill-hidden anger.

“Don’t be so melodramatic; we didn’t wreck anything,” she responded, raising an eyebrow at him in the same supercilious tone she had used on the man now glaring at Harry grimly, hood askew.

“For Merlin’s sake, we’re standing outside a heavily warded Death Eater’s house,” Harry hissed. “Seeing as how you knew the exact time and location of what I was attempting, I expect you know that any magic in the area will register with the ward and send a veritable army of Death Eaters right to our location?”

The man grunted in amusement. “We’re not nearly so far behind as the rest of the world in our capabilities.” He sighed impatiently at Harry’s patently unimpressed look. “That portion of the wards is negated for a field of about seven meters.”

“Stupefy!” Harry shouted without a second’s pause, flicking out his wand and pointing it at the man before aiming at the woman. “Scalantus!”

The two spells bounced harmlessly off the shield the two had waiting.

“Do that again,” the man said, his eyes now glinting angrily, “and you will quickly become less interesting.”

“Be nice,” the woman chastised mockingly. “We did interrupt his rescue mission, even if we didn’t wreck it. Now,” she turned to look at

Harry, pulling her hood down as she did so, “an Animagus at your age; that's a pretty nice trick.”

“You'll excuse me if I don't take that compliment sincerely.”

Harry glared at the two coldly, eyes searching for some kind of identification or purpose. They both wore shapeless cloaks of some dark coloring, heavy fabric covering their arms and hands. The woman was holding a rather short, lightly colored wand while the man held no wand at all; instead, he held a rather odd metallic contraption Harry couldn't place.

He tapped a complicated pattern onto his device, and the area briefly crackled with faint sparks of magic. “Wards back on,” he informed the woman in a trained manner. “Level two possible discovery.”

Harry cursed. With no possible way to transform back into his Animagus form, he would either have to retreat and come back at a later date, something he didn't feel comfortable doing, knowing that the two in front of him, and possibly more people, had access to the Order's plans. Or he could continue, changing the plan as he went along: something that was sure to infuriate the Order, not to mention Sirius.

“Sit, please, Mr. Collins,” the woman said, settling herself in the grass. “We don't have so much time that it can be spent with the two of you glaring at each other. That goes for you, too,” she said with a short glance at her partner.

“How about I stand, and you tell me what you want?” Harry snapped.

“Suit yourself. But I'm hardly going to tell you much of anything at the moment; I suppose one of the most pressing things we want is to know why you haven't done anything about that skeleton you found near that Justern.”

Harry blinked. He had almost forgotten about that, busy with everything that happened since then. But what did it have to do with

these people? The skeleton had to be forty, maybe fifty years old, if the note he had also found was any indication.

Did that mean they were somehow related to JIESS?

That seemed to be the most likely argument, if, as the woman had said, the most pressing question was why he had done nothing...

“Because your club doesn't seem with the bother,” Harry said dismissively, taking up that guess and running with it. “Though I can't seem to remember... Are you in the one that hosts the weekly tea parties, or the one that passes out flyers?”

She glared at him, before smiling grimly in acceptance of the scored point.

“Neither, of course; we've been fighting against the Ministry, Order, and Death Eaters for years, though, and I'm sure this will gratify you, most of our recent effort shave been against the Death Eaters more than any other group.”

“You attack everyone, but at least you attack the murderers and bigots more than you attack anyone else. Consider me gratified.”

“Stop making quips and pay attention,” the man growled. “Maybe you'll actually learn something.”

Harry snorted. “I'm with the Order; you're hardly going to get any applause or sympathy from me.”

“Our efforts have been less successful than we wish,” the woman continued without pausing. “And we find ourselves in the position of having only one option left.”

Harry waited impatiently for her to continue.

“We're going to eradicate the Statue of Secrecy.”

“You're insane,” Harry said flatly. “Unless your goal is to completely wipe out the Wizarding World, of course.”

“I'm not sure if it was the same 'where you come from',” the man said, sardonically stressing the phrase, “but here the government is utterly corrupt. You can't be born from Muggles without having your life threatened, you can't have a containable disease without having your rights taken away, and you can't argue with the system, which is run by Death Eaters, and Order members, by the way, without being thrown in Azkaban or being thrown on the front lines.”

“I can hardly argue with two thirds of your argument, but I doubt the Order has done anything to warrant your attacks.”

“We have focused on them the least,” the woman conceded, “but they have warranted our stance nonetheless. Prejudice, judgment, high-handedness and refusal to act. They're only a step above the rest of the world that does nothing but wait for someone to save them.”

“Right,” Harry drawled, “and anarchy is so much better, of course.”

“It'd only be anarchy,” she responded, “if we didn't have a plan.”

“Watch the Order,” the man said, tapping his watch and showing it to the woman before standing up, “and you'll see what we mean. When you do, come for a visit.”

“Where at?” Harry asked, mind racing. He didn't believe them, of course; they had to have some information backing up their claims, though, which would no doubt help against the Death Eaters.

Yet, he remembered everyone's immediate reaction to him being about to speak in Parseltongue, and how Dumbledore, even in his original dimension, would concede to the Ministry's worst acts of corruption...

“We'll send you a package,” the woman said, “and you'll know where to go from there. And since the Order will be frantic by now,

I'm sure, tell them that those plants interfered with transmission, and that you had to guess the password to make the bag disappear. 'Recede container', by the way.

“Unless, of course, you plan to tell the Order about us.”

“Wards off,” the man interrupted. “Ten seconds before power drainage, if you're going to return to your Animagus form.”

Harry eyed them warily, before transforming back into his werewolf form. He growled shortly at them, and stood smugly as the man flinched back.

“Don't be such a git, Collins,” the woman said with an amused sigh, before putting her hand on the man's shoulder and disappearing.

The wards softly crackled back into place.

“--follow it to his last location, Black, it's not that difficult of a concept--”

“Seeing as how your only apparent skills involve adding one cube of sugar or two, Grimsleigh, instead of anything more useful, how about you--”

“Sirius, be quiet,” Peter said shortly, and Harry's ear twitched as he felt the device resettling. “Collins, what the hell was that? Any threat?”

The room quieted down immediately as he shook his head, then directed the camera at the no longer visible bag.

“Ah,” Hestia Jones said in recognition. “We didn't even think about interference from other systems; this is only safeguarded against wards and the like.”

“Something to fix later, then. Are you sure there's no trouble, Collins? If not, go ahead and examine those hinges again. We almost have it...”

Harry walked over to the gate once more, trying to memorize the scents of the two who had just left. Perhaps he would accidentally bump into one of them somewhere... the ability to recognize them, and then confront them on his own terms, would be a definite advantage.

He tuned out the snippets of advanced conversation from Pettigrew and Jones, catching occasionally names or bits of conjecture. Having already seen Bill Weasley explain the basics of them to Hermione, Harry had decided that they were far too complicated for practicality or genuine interest; even Hermione, who had brought the topic up, had had a rather glazed expression at Bill's conclusion.

The only similar topic Harry had any experience in was ward deconstruction, but, as the two conversing were simply trying to figure out the wards used, making the Parkinson home vulnerable to invasion wasn't on the agenda just yet.

“Got it!” The two exclaimed together.

“Anything either of you haven't seen before?” Lily asked. “There hasn't been anything published about new ones recently.”

“Nothing,” Hestia Jones answered smugly. “Hopefully that means they're all getting complacent, especially since the Parkinsons have connections to the experimental spells departments at the Ministry and would have new ones before anyone else.”

“With foreknowledge,” Pettigrew continued, “we could probably bring them down in an hour, maybe half of that at the less well-connected houses.

“Which means that our part in this venture is over until tomorrow, so, Moody, you're up.”

“You know the plan,” Moody said without preamble. “Try to take as many of them out before they capture you, especially the more fanatical of the lot. Your job is to get Williams and then get out. No investigating, exploring, or rescuing other prisoners. I don't want to

see any of those rookie mistakes from you, even if you are one. And I expect you to have finished your syllabus by the end of the week, so no slouching off. Got it?" He didn't wait for Harry's answer. "Good. Now go to it, Collins."

"Be careful, H—Chris," Sirius said worriedly, and Harry woofed in agreement. There was a short pause, and Harry could imagine his godfather's suspicious look.

"And don't even think about mocking them until you escape."

Giving a crackling sigh of disappointment over the receiver, Harry transformed himself and cut off communication.

'I never do think...'

--OoO--

"--Barty Crouch will definitely have to go, the misogynistic git."

"What was that, Bella?" An amused Crouch stuck his head through the doorway to look at her with wry amusement, and she looked up from the note she was writing.

"Not you, much to my dismay," she responded, rolling her eyes and he grinned, entering the room to sit across from her. "Your father, the almighty Minister."

"Ah, him. I'd be right in line with you, but then who would there be?" He asked, the question getting the attention of a few nearby Death Eaters. "Someone worse, no doubt. Remember that awful Senior Secretary he used to have?"

Antonin Dolohov raised one eyebrow, a look of distaste on his face. "Wasn't he arrested for forgery and misconstruing the budget a few years ago?"

"A corrupt Minister, though," Augustus Rookwood contemplated. "That'd be easier than a virtually blind Minister..."

“...and more useful than a corrupt head of Magical Games and Sports?” Bellatrix suggested archly, and he scowled.

“Alright, then, Black. Let's say we offed him-- sorry, you offed him, Crouch,” he edited at Barty's pointed look. “Who'd you pick as Minister that would actually be likely to get the spot?”

“Well, myself, of course,” she exclaimed, fluttering her eyelashes before frowning in thought. “A couple of days ago, I would have said Lucius could have gotten it. But he's still missing; besides, even if he did escape all safe and sound, my belief in his competency has reached an all-time low.”

Pollard Parkinson laughed at that. “Not to fear, Bellatrix. We should get him back in a couple of days, if Severus was right and the Order doesn't back out of their mission trip.”

The rest of the group gave him confused looks. “What does that have to do with it?” Barty asked, twirling his wand and making two quills dance across the table. “Sure, if we decided to actually hold onto Collins and use him as ransom, then those fools would release Lucius, but we're not.”

Parkinson lowered his voice conspiratorially. “It's not just Collins that we're going to use as ransom. Our Lord has--”

He broke off suddenly, as his pocket started shouting his name. Looking simultaneously annoyed and concerned, he pulled a mirror out of his pocket, which had his daughter's face on it.

“What is it, Pansy?”

“It's the wards! Some lunatic is outside, throwing curses at the house!”

Pollard's mouth tightened, a grim expression on his face. “Is he alone?”

“As far as I can tell, but he hasn't let up on spells yet and... damn! He's putting spells around the house that should be visible for miles. You need to hurry, Father, or the Aurors will show up to see what is going on...”

“Do you need some backup?” Augustus interrupted, standing up and pulling out his wand.

“I don't think so, but it wouldn't hurt,” Parkinson responded, an angry gleam in his eye. “The wards are open to your Apparation. Come if you want, since it should prove to be very entertaining once I get my hands on him...”

--OoO--

Hurriedly conjuring near-indestructible neon ropes that wrapped themselves around Parkinson's gate, Harry watched the grounds for any appearing Death Eater who, he was sure, had received the message from the figure watching Harry angrily through the front windows.

While Jones and Pettigrew had suggested using the opportunity to gain intelligence on which wards the Death Eaters were most likely to use, they had added that actually destroying the wards, especially just to get attention, would waste a chance to do some damage later. Harry had agreed to the stipulation, telling them that the Parkinsons had a collection of banned items that not even a corrupt Ministry could ignore.

Instead of breaking into the house, Harry decided that he might as well be caught vandalizing the exterior as opposed to any other scenario: not only had a majority of the Order refused to let Harry skulk around Knockturn Alley until being kidnapped, this plan had a rather strong chance of drawing negative attention to the Parkinsons. He also laying some a few rudimentary defenses, sending word-activated explosive spells to be absorbed by the ground.

With that last thought, Harry pointed his wand towards the sky and drew a caricatured Dark Mark followed by a line of text inviting all

interested wizards to apply for Death Eaters status through the Parkinsons, sending a sarcastic wave to the visibly furious silhouette watching him.

Sending several simple spells to splash uselessly against the gate, Harry waved sarcastically once more at the figure in the window before turning around and surveying the grounds behind him consideringly.

While the family and, more importantly, Voldemort, might be content thinking Harry was simply snooping and fell afoul of the wards, Harry wished for a more solid alibi for his getting caught in the trap. Perhaps he could be, after catching Malfoy so easily, attempting the same with the Parkinsons?

A rather thin excuse, too thin for Harry's comfort, but--

“Crucio!”

With a small squawk of surprise that he would later deny, Harry ducked and spun to see the incoming opponent. The red light splashed against the tree behind him as Death Eaters came into view.

“Is that all you've got?” Harry yelled in return as he took cover among the trees, knowing it would be useless to send any spells back until they had cleared the wards.

“Crucio!”

In an almost orchestrated response, nearly a dozen beams of similar light honed in on him, and the battle was on.

--OoO--

Robin McIntyre bit his lip in an obvious attempt to hide his facial expression as he scanned the horizon along the edge of Parkinson's property.

The owner of the property, on the other hand, took no such measure.

Face tightened into a furious grimace, Pollard wrenched the front door open and marched out onto the grounds towards the silhouette figure playing merry hell in the distance.

“Bet it's one of Dumbledore's lackeys,” Barty muttered to Bellatrix in amusement, setting a meandering speed at which the group followed Parkinson.

“Maybe,” she responded doubtfully. “Most of them have more common sense or more cowardice.”

“Black?” He asked in negating response. “Those Weasley and Prewitt horrors? Having common sense?”

“A point for each of us, then, as you didn't defend the second variable.”

Robin took a stumbling step towards the two, eyes focused on the bastardized Dark Mark instead of the uneven ground. “I'll see that Dumbledore's lackey and raise you a Collins.”

“Collins, already?” Nott said incredulously. “Good Lord, Severus just might be on our side after all.”

Augustus sighed sorrowfully as he aimed his wand at Collins. “Remember, Nott: he that lives upon hope will die fasting.”

In synchronism, the small group cast the Cruciatus at the human-shaped shadow that revealed Collins's hiding place.

McIntyre watched as Collins dodged and, turning his wand into a spotlight that made them all wince at the sudden light before the brief spell faded, said, “You know, I can do that spell, too. How about a little extension of vocabulary?”

“Really?” Parkinson said coldly as he levitated over the gate, tossing a spell at Collins as he did so. “Let's see it, then, boy.”

“I'd much rather use it on that Black still hiding behind the fence; you don't interest me nearly as much.”

“Then you certainly chose the wrong house,” Parkinson responded, keeping up a steady blur of spells that Collins apparently didn't recognize, choosing to dodge them instead of risk a shield charm. “Because you are now on my list of interest!”

“Scandalus!” Collins shot back, the voiced spell requiring Pollard's first dodge, and Parkinson counterattacked with a navy spell that met its mark.

Bellatrix sighed in disappointment from her vantage point next to Robin. “Alas, it's entirely possible that Pollard won't even need our help.”

Robin eyed her critically. “Nothing in that sentence said that we shouldn't go out and help him anyway.”

He bit his lip nervously as she turned towards him, the stark reminder that she held a superior posture to him suddenly evident in her stance.

“For a new one, you're certainly learning quickly,” she acceded before turning to the fighting pair, leaving Robin to breathe in relief. “Parkinson,” she shouted, “is your dignity and sense of superiority restored?”

“Restored?” The Death Eater returned indignantly, gritting his teeth as his shield charm attempted to buckle under one of Collins' spells. “They were never at ris--”

He paused in a moment of irked realization and sent three silvery domes to the ground, face etched with anger as he glared contemptuously at his opponent. “Explosives? Explosives? Do not try your paltry spells on me, Collins – I have little patience for schoolyard tricks.”

With a quick slash of his wand, he sent the domes hurtling towards Collins. He then removed the spell as they neared his opponent,

watching as the delayed detonations sent Collins flying solidly into the ground a distance away.

“Wonderful,” Rookwood said happily as he also levitated over the fence. “That means it's our turn.”

--OoO--

“Still,” Lily said, brow creasing with annoyed confusion, “we should have done this before, just in case Malfoy knows something that could help Collins.”

Snape scowled. “If you had been paying any attention, you would have heard me say that not only will Veritaserum probably fail to give us many answers, letting Collins overhear any valuable information before packing him off to get captured by the Dark Lord is a less than intelligent plan. Do I need to repeat myself once more?”

“That's all well and good,” Peter said, “but what if there is some trap or spell that will result in Collins getting into deeper trouble than we planned? Malfoy might also know if Voldemort decided to suspend whatever the hell he was up to.”

“The Dark Lord is not one to tell all of his followers one thing, and then tell just one of them something contrary,” Snape said, annoyed. “Even if he did elect to be at the mansion, Malfoy would hardly be aware.”

“At this stage,” Albus interrupted with finality. “All we can do is continue the path we have chosen and hope that Alastor has success.”

“Wait a second,” Peter said, stopping them all from moving and interrupting Snape's disgruntled comment about the Auror. “If Voldemort made it so Veritaserum doesn't work on Malfoy, and we try to force the issue, couldn't we potentially send him to another dimension? Considering the little knowledge we have of the topic...”

There was a moment of uneasy contemplation, before the door to the room holding Malfoy captive opened. Those waiting in Dumbledore's office looked up curiously, only to see Moody's scowl and Minerva shaking her head.

"I never thought I would ever applaud Voldemort for anything," Moody told the room at large, "but he certainly has us beat in this respect."

"Nothing?" Lily asked. "What about other truth serums, spells..."

"If Veritaserum won't work," McGonagall answered, "then nothing will."

"I don't know about that," Moody argued, giving a pointed look to Dumbledore, "Collins and Grimsleigh seemed to have the right idea."

Snape waved his hand in dismissal of that sentence. "As much as I hesitate to stand between an Auror and a path of violence, Collins was fairly certain of where the Dark Lord holds court, and wouldn't have depended on Lucius's answer to make his decision. We, on the other hand, would have such a dependence."

"So," Lily said in a voice of uncertainty, "now we wait?"

"No," Snape said, "now we make sure that Grimsleigh or anyone else does not do something monstrously idiotic while we wait." And, with that last statement, he left the office without another word.

Everyone else stood and began waling to the door in partial agreement. "Am I the only one with the feeling that Snape doesn't like Grimsleigh?" Peter asked facetiously.

"Is there anyone here who actually thinks Snape is fond of anyone?" Moody responded.

Lily watched them leave hesitantly, quietly positioning herself to be the last one left in Dumbledore's office. Not quite sure if she was taking the right course of action, she gave all the portraits a pleading

look for silence, knowing that they'd temporarily comply out of curiosity, and darted into the room where Malfoy remained a prisoner.

“Malfoy,” she greeted levelly as she pulled the door mostly shut behind her and pulled out her wand.

“Mudblood,” he responded in just as bland a tone.

It's the only thing I can think of, she remembered Grimsleigh saying from a conversation earlier that day. If I stop him from going, and that's a definite 'if', he'd just go later.

He obviously knows what he's getting into, she had responded, and Grimsleigh had given her a look that told her he knew she didn't believe that. Well, what do you want me to do about it?

The Transero Stimuli, of course. You know how to cast it. I don't, or I wouldn't have mentioned it at all to you.

Her eyes had gone wide at this. You want me to cast it on you? Aside from the fact that I have no idea what all the spell could do, and the fact that I don't routinely go around cursing people just because they ask, don't you think Collins will be a little less than happy at the idea?

He had laughed at her, and she was nearly tempted to just walk away when he shook his head. That's not what I was asking you at all. If there were no other option, then yes, I would be asking that, but...

But? She asked curiously. What do you want me to do, cast it on Snape?

No. He had said, after looking tempted by the thought. I want you to cast it on Malfoy.

Let me get this straight. She had responded with an angry frown. You want me to torture Malfoy, in order to stop Collins from the same? Something he volunteered for?

Yes.

She sighed unhappily as she remembered the direct answer. For all that she despised the idea in principle, she still found herself standing in front of a bound and wandless Malfoy, preparing to curse him.

She looked at him for a second, and Malfoy returned the gaze with a condescending sneer and a raised eyebrow. Her eyes narrowed.

Later, after she had elicited promises of silence from the portraits and given a short nod of success to Grimsleigh's questioning look, she realized that it hadn't been half so hard as she imagined it to be.

--OoO--

'This,' Harry realized as he attempted to move his arms underneath him and sit up, 'was one of my least intelligent plans.'

"Wonderful," he said out loud as he stood up, trying to hasten his eyes' adjustment to the dim light as he searched for his wand. "Absolutely, mindblowingly --"

"Wonderful!" He heard one of the Death Eaters yell out, and he continued to search frantically for his wand. "That means it's our turn."

"Oh, hell," Harry muttered, as he turned to see them leave the boundary of the gate. Giving his wand up for lost, and taking the small consolation that at least the Death Eaters couldn't take it from him, he hurriedly climbed the nearest tree and waited for someone to pass underneath.

"We should really do this more often, Parkinson," he heard Bellatrix comment in the distance. "Just trap all our mildly amusing opponents in your wards and go hunting when we have a spare moment."

"A wonderful idea, Black," Pollard responded dryly. "Except for the fact that if they're left alone, they start decorating with all sorts of tacky spells."

“What's even more annoying,” another one said nearby, and Harry glared as Barty Crouch Jr. came into sight as he walked underneath him, “is when they think they've outsmarted you by hiding in a tree like they haven't yet evolved.”

Not waiting for Crouch to do anything but glance up with an amused expression, Harry jumped and tackled Crouch, kicking him in the stomach and wrenching the wand from his grasp. “Reducto!”

An opaque shield appeared in front of Crouch just in time to take the spell.

“Give it up, Collins,” Parkinson said as he walked out of the shadows of the forest, other Death Eaters doing the same until they had Harry surrounded in a near circle. “I'd be amused if I weren't equally annoyed, and you'd do best not do anything more to tip the balance.”

Harry looked quickly around him, counting his opponents and knowing that there was no way he'd be able to defeat any of them, let alone continue the fight. He didn't remember the Death Eaters, especially Parkinson, of his past being as skilled, and, after the easy capture of Lucius Malfoy, had seriously miscalculated.

Grimacing bitterly, Harry prepared to throw Crouch's wand on the ground in surrender.

“Wait!” Bellatrix said suddenly, and Harry tightened his grip on the weapon reflexively. “Our little Order member here promised me a Cruciatus.”

Various groans of annoyance circulated through the group, and Parkinson frowned. “Black, must you really? He doesn't even have his own wand -- you can curse him later without toying with him.”

“It's called magic, Pollard,” Bellatrix responded. “Accio Collin's wand.”

Harry smiled as Bellatrix frowned in frustration and spun to glare at him. "Collins! Where is it?"

Raising an eyebrow, Harry just stared coldly back, a smug grin in place. While rather frightened to be so easily beaten, Harry resolved to keep his tradition of making his captors just as unhappy as himself, regardless of Sirius's admonishment.

Scowling, she waved her wand again in the direction Harry had been thrown earlier. "Accio wand!"

This, much to Harry's dissatisfaction, was successful, and Harry's wand flew into Bellatrix's outstretched hand. She stared at it with a dissecting look, before giving a bark of laughter. "Petty dark magic?" She asked incredulously, holding out the wand Harry had made several days ago, one which Harry valued much less than the one he had bought from Ollivander. "Pathetic. Crucio!"

Harry fell on all fours as it made contact, clenching his jaw to not make a sound as imagined knives bit into him and his limbs twitched as his senses were overcharged for a timeless second .

Then it stopped.

Or so Harry thought, until he realized that his muscles were still unconsciously jumping and Bellatrix was still pointing his wand at him. It hadn't stopped, Harry thought with a bit of wonder, he just couldn't feel it.

Trying to ignore the part of his mind that had firmly decided not feeling the curse probably wasn't a good thing, Harry had hardly noticed that the Cruciatus was lifted until Bellatrix spoke.

"I'm disappointed," she said dropping it to the ground. "He tried to take us on with a wand that doesn't even work right. We must not be intimidating enough."

“Or,” Harry said, dragging a numb hand through the thistle covered topsoil without feeling a thing, “you and your two-bit Lord just aren't worth the effort.”

Parkinson waved his hand dismissively at Harry's statement as he walked towards the middle of the circle where Harry stood. “Keep in mind that you are out-manned, outmaneuvered, and,” he waved his wand and dissolved Harry's lighted conjurations with a second's incantation, “without much experience. If we aren't worth the effort, what does that make a Mudblood like yourself?”

He clamped his hand onto Harry's shoulder, and, shoving him roughly to the side while still keeping contact, activated a Portkey. Wincing at the sudden maelstrom of wind and the disarming journey typical of such travel, Harry could barely sense the other Death Eaters following them before the Portkey deposited the two on the ground.

Never having become accustomed to travel by Portkey, Harry stumbled and fell to the ground before warily looking around.

“Good evening, My Lord,” Parkinson said pleasantly to a figure not standing far from where Harry knelt ungracefully.

“To you as well, Pollard,” Voldemort responded, an undercurrent of amusement in his voice. “I see you were successful a bit earlier than planned.”

Harry froze momentarily at the sound, paling as he realized the severity of the situation. Far from being a relatively simple, however painful, rescue attempt, this had now become something Harry doubted his ability to walk away from.

'At least,' he thought as he slowly reached for the knife he had threatened Pettigrew with just days ago, 'I won't feel anything.'

“ Good evening, Tom Riddle,” Harry said darkly as he stood, gleefully taking in Voldemort's angry surprise at the name. “It's such a pleasure to meet you.”

And he lunged, knife in hand, for the kill.

--OoO--

A/N: Well. Aside from the abysmally long time to write this, at least it has the beginning of the major plot. I had told a few people that this would be the last chapter (it'd have been a lot longer), and then I could start on a sequel – one with a plot, storyline, etc...

Then I realized that it took 8 months to write only 15 pages, and it seemed that that plan didn't stand too much of a chance of becoming reality.

So, if you have any questions, comments, scathing reports, or something you want to happen in this (because writer's block sucks nearly as much as trying to remember something off the tip of your tongue) please review!

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